



## A Place for Reconciliation? Conflict and Locality in Northern Ireland

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# **A place for reconciliation?**

**Conflict and locality in Northern Ireland**

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# Preface

**T**his is the 18th report from the think tank Democratic Dialogue. DD gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance for this project from the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, via the Community Relations Council. DD also acknowledges the generosity of its core funders, which currently include the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, as well as the CRC.

The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of Tony MacAulay and Gareth Higgins in conducting fieldwork for this study in Ballymena and Armagh respectively. We also wish to thank the research advisory group—Sue Williams, Dominic Bryan, Ruth Moore and Libby Keys—for giving generously of their time to support the project and for providing valuable insights into the theory and practice

of reconciliation in societies emerging from conflict.

We give special thanks to all those who agreed to be interviewed during the course of the research and for speaking openly and honestly about their views and experiences of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. We are particularly grateful to the three district councils and their respective community relations officers—Aubrey McClintock of Armagh City and District Council, Jackie Patton of Ballymena Borough Council and Christine Rodgers of Omagh District Council—for their support and assistance at all stages of the research. We also thank those who participated in the pilot research.

We would also like to thank all those who participated in, and those (Luc Huyse, Ed Garcia, Monica McWilliams, Colin Craig,

Noreen Callaghan and Avila Kilmurray) who presented at, the June 2004 Democratic Dialogue round table on reconciliation, where we presented some preliminary findings of this research. Their participation and comments are valued, as well as their contribution to the companion report, *Reconciliation: Rhetoric or Relevant?*, published by Democratic Dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

Comments on the publication are very welcome. Our catalogue of publications (available in pdf format) is detailed on our web site.

Anyone wishing to be kept informed of DD projects and events should contact us to be added to our regular e-mailing list. All the necessary details are on p2. ☺

<sup>1</sup> available from DD or at [www.democraticdialogue.org/documents/R17.pdf](http://www.democraticdialogue.org/documents/R17.pdf)

# Executive summary

**I**n January 2003, Democratic Dialogue embarked on a research project on ‘community reconciliation’ in Northern Ireland. The term reconciliation is not well developed in the region and no agreed definition exists, despite increasingly common usage. The study explored how reconciliation is conceptualised and implemented, politically and at the grass roots, in different areas. It examined how local government creates or constrains opportunities for reconciliation initiatives. And it generated recommendations as to how as a concept reconciliation could be sharpened, so as to improve practice locally and internationally.

The research examined the role voluntary groups play in facilitating community reconciliation, their relationship to district councils and the degree to which councils create an atmosphere conducive to such work. It was hoped this would assist effective partnerships and mutual understanding between sectors, clarify what reconciliation concretely means and, in the long term, help make that practice more sustainable.

We chose three local authorities as case

studies: Armagh City and District Council, Omagh District Council and Ballymena Borough Council. A semi-structured interview formed the main part of the research. Three researchers conducted the interviews with 58 individuals from the councils, political parties and community groups. Issues explored included: views and opinions on reconciliation, how it related to one’s work and voluntary activities, relevant policies, practices and structures, relationships between and within sectors, and who was deemed to hold ultimate responsibility for building reconciliation. Themes from the interviews were extracted, categorised and interpreted by the project team within the context of the international and domestic literature on reconciliation.<sup>1</sup>

To stimulate discussion, and to try to frame the reconciliation debate in Northern Ireland, we presented interviewees with a working definition of reconciliation, applicable to societies emerging from conflict, having reviewed a range of existing definitions. This premises reconciliation on an understanding that to build peace requires attention to relationships.

<sup>1</sup> See references at the end of this report.

Reconciliation is thus the process of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships, but it embraces a range of activities. We see reconciliation as a voluntary act that cannot be imposed. It generally involves five interwoven strands:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society.
2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past.
3. Building positive relationships.
4. Significant cultural and attitudinal change.
5. Substantial social, economic and political change.

The research aimed to:

- explore how a range of individuals from political parties and civil society conceptualised reconciliation in Northern Ireland;
- unpack the concept of reconciliation, in the context of the definition proposed; and
- identify the roles and responsibilities of councils and community groups in pursuing reconciliation locally.

**I**n terms of how individuals conceptualised reconciliation we found that interviewees were open to a discussion on reconciliation and, in general terms, were willing to explore how it related to them and fitted with their work.

While complex ideas about reconciliation were aired, most interviewees were fairly vague on the details of what it might entail or how it might be pursued.

Bracketing together the responses, the following themes emerged as to what reconciliation might primarily be about:

- addressing relationships between former

enemies and those estranged due to conflict;

- engaging in confidence- and trust-building measures;
- rehumanising and getting to know the ‘other’;
- recognising that harm had been done to another;
- showing remorse about this;
- providing explanations as to why it had happened;
- finding ways to heal old wounds; and
- seeking means of accommodation, partnership and respect for difference, and recognising mutual dependence.

Councillors and council staff generally saw reconciliation as one of many issues faced in their daily work, but not a priority in the midst of helping people obtain their statutory rights. This suggests a legalistic understanding of dealing with past conflicts, rather than a relationship-driven focus. It also suggests that they do not see attainment of rights as a component of reconciliation.

In voluntary organisations reconciliation tended to be seen in terms of building and mending relationships. Some representatives saw it as a priority—even when their work was not explicitly labelled as such.

There was a distinct lack of clarity among interviewees as to what, specifically, reconciliation meant. Most tended to view this as an obstacle to intercommunal processes or policies and practices to address the legacy of the conflict. The lack of clarity was also a paradox—given that some interviewees were involved in work funded under the reconciliation banner. This did not mean that some did not have their own understanding of the term,



but a shared understanding was certainly not evident.

Few could articulate a vision of what a reconciled society would look like. Several respondents seemed to hold the view that it would be more tolerant, with less segregation and greater social ease and freedom from fear. Most were fairly pessimistic about achieving this in the short term.

The respondents appeared to have difficulty relating reconciliation, as a concept, to their practice. It was not a term they used in their daily work, or felt particularly comfortable in using to describe what they did.

Of those directly engaged in self-described peacebuilding activities, most appeared more comfortable with ‘community relations’, ‘good relations’ or ‘community cohesion’. No interviewee advocated replacing these with reconciliation, although many seemed comfortable using them interchangeably.

Reconciliation seemed to imply a much deeper process, for which some felt the communities with which they worked were not prepared. This was one reason why they did not use the term.

Views of reconciliation were influenced by ideological stance. Some interviewees, mostly clergy and unionist politicians, made theological references. For others, however, reconciliation as a concept stimulated a negative or cynical reaction, dismissed as being theological and therefore not relevant.

Little reference was made to ‘forgiveness’, often highlighted in theological literature as an important element. It did not feature highly as a prerequisite of reconciliation, even for those

from a religious background. With a few exceptions, the interviewees spoke about reconciliation in the abstract, making no reference to any changes required of themselves.

Funding from the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation heavily influenced perceptions. Reconciliation as a concept was largely viewed through the prism of the EU programme—despite few being clear as to what a European definition of reconciliation might be. Most felt that the funding bodies provided little direction in this regard.

Few respondents made reference to reconciliation as anything other than a ‘two traditions’ (Catholic and Protestant) issue. A more holistic understanding of the need to address relationships across society—including in areas little affected by the ‘troubles’—did not come across strongly. The role of members of ethnic minorities in reconciliation initiatives is also an absence to be addressed.

**A**s to the working definition, we found reaction was overwhelmingly positive and brought the discussion to a different level. Several respondents were surprised by the definition’s complexity. The impression we formed was that interviewees saw reconciliation as a very abstract concept, and were pleasantly surprised to see it broken down into possible steps or components. Some questioned whether there were prior steps (such as confidence-building) before one could tackle the issues proposed.

Few interviewees spent any time commenting on or contradicting the assertion about a

shared vision, but there was some divergence between the case studies. Several respondents in Ballymena felt this should be emphasised, yet it did not feature strongly in Omagh or Armagh. These appear to be more mixed communities and there may be a greater sense of commonality, but this is speculative.

Acknowledging the past was, by a large margin, the aspect given most emphasis by respondents. Dealing with the past was not only viewed as requiring particular consideration; many felt it had to be the first step in any reconciliation process. Few interviewees, however, specified what this would involve. While most respondents definitely saw value in dealing with the past, they did not know how to deal with it effectively.

Most made some reference to the importance of building positive relationships, but it was the focus of little discussion. Perhaps this was felt to be self-evident.

The responses on attitudinal change were particularly interesting, as they reflected an understanding of the term which differed from our intent. While some interviewees agreed that significant cultural change was important, others were uncertain about its meaning. Some perceived the statement as implying that people would have to change their 'cultural traditions' for reconciliation to take place. This appeared to be particularly true of those from a Protestant background, with the assertion that 'culture' was intrinsic to 'community' and not something which should be changed.

On socio-economic and political change, the vast majority of respondents felt this already enjoyed disproportionate emphasis

under PEACE II, to the detriment of relationship-building and addressing the legacy of the past.

**W**hen analysing roles, relationships and responsibilities for building reconciliation, we found that relationships within and between sectors had a significant impact on reconciliation. While individual relationships were often described in encouraging terms, tensions were clearly apparent, particularly between voluntary organisations and local authorities.

In all three case studies, a common thread of negativity appeared in discussions with voluntary-sector interviewees in relation to their respective councils. To some degree the sector seems to view the council as little more than a potential funding avenue and not a major player in reconciliation. This view, of lack of co-operation and joint initiative, seemed however to be restricted to councils as institutions rather than their staff.

Most voluntary-sector interviewees were positive about the support offered by council officials. It was obvious from our discussions that officials were often limited by the decisions made by elected representatives, hampering the type and depth of work in which they could engage.

Relationships between councillors were generally perceived by those we interviewed as poor. Some interviewees felt strained relationships and public disagreements had a negative impact on community relations. For example, certain councillors appeared willing to lend private support to projects, but would not do so

publicly for fear of jeopardising votes within their communal catchment areas.

There were diverse views on whether further responsibility for reconciliation should be devolved to councils—as subsequently envisaged, conditionally, under the *A Shared Future* policy framework published in March 2005. Perhaps not surprisingly, council staff, managers of local strategy partnerships and councillors were generally enthusiastic about this possibility, envisaging local authorities taking the lead in much of this work. Many were however reluctant, cautious of being given added responsibility without adequate planning.

But within the voluntary sector respondents were generally hesitant, particularly if further funding streams were to be administered by the council. A clear picture emerged of reconciliation commonly being ‘politicised’ within councils, being treated in a partisan fashion.

**I**n the final analysis, it is not only the specifics of how we define reconciliation that matter, but how we explain and use the concept. Even if an agreed definition is difficult to achieve in a society in or coming out of conflict, there is an onus on all of us broadly to explain what we mean by such terms. Only through robust dialogue can we ensure a more reflexive peacebuilding practice.

There is a lack of strategic thinking within statutory bodies, funders and the voluntary sector about the concept of reconciliation.

Dealing with the past was identified by many respondents as the next major component of the reconciliation agenda. Much work remains to be done to unpack what this means.

That said, in areas where little peacebuilding work has been done, it would be a mistake to jump prematurely into this debate. Grassroots relationship-building and basic dialogue is first needed.

We still found a nervousness about promoting reconciliation, and clearly the process is not adequately supported or understood at the political level. We found, certainly in community organisations, that local politicians were blamed at times for continuing to play sectarian and polarising politics—undermining attempts to build relationships, change attitudes or assist in finding a common vision. Ways need to be found to stop rewarding segregation, politically and geographically.

We found that the term reconciliation was not used a great deal on the ground. This reflects the limited effort to date to define or at least debate how to use the concept. This has left a range of assumed meanings attached to it.

Reconciliation is also seen as a deep and sometimes threatening process. Respondents chose at times not to use the term in their daily work because they feared it would scare people off. This might have arisen because of its perceived religious overtones or because reconciliation was understood somehow as ‘coming together’ in some process of social and political transformation.

As such, the respondents (with a few exceptions) seemed instinctively to understand that reconciliation was deeper than limited coexistence. Some would argue that coexistence has always been the dominant model for the majority in Northern Ireland (including the middle class for the most part not directly affected by

the conflict) and that this has led to separate development and perpetual division. Something more is needed.

Overall, there seems to be an anxiety in Northern Ireland that genuine reconciliation will mean some compromise, or at least the rehumanisation of old enemies. Reconciliation implies a muddying of the waters and fundamental change in perceptions of the 'other'. Our research suggests some readiness to engage in breaking down myopic understandings of the determinants of the conflict, but the reaction to the term also implies much groundwork remains to be done to create conditions conducive to a deeper process of reconciliation. This also requires robust political support, within localities and more widely.

We found that voluntary groups are further down the line in thinking about reconciliation than district councillors. The voluntary sector is more philosophically and practically involved with reconciliation. Councillors are largely not engaging with the topic, and at times we struggled to get them interested. Most seemed to be locked into divided local politics, which our community-group respondents saw as undermining their reconciliation efforts.

Our research suggests that vigour is needed: reconciliation, as a difficult and complex process, needs to be championed at the highest level, confronting the challenges it presents. We found serious doubts as to the ability of locally-elected politicians to forward a reconciliation agenda in a non-sectarian and effective manner. Reconciliation issues have become

political footballs in the council chamber, with one party grasping at issues (such as equality or the distribution of funding) in opposition to, or to the exclusion of, other parties. The research underlines a long-held criticism that community relations is not taken seriously by council officials or elected representatives, and that community-relations officers often feel sidelined, with their work deemed of low priority.

In summary, most of those to whom we spoke would only argue for further responsibility for reconciliation being devolved to district councils if there was unequivocal broader support, resources were adequate and there was significant change in how councils, and councillors, operate.

The *A Shared Future* policy framework and the review of public administration in Northern Ireland set out new challenges for local government. They also offer new opportunities for councils, and councillors, in partnership with practitioners within the community, to foster reconciliation. ”

# Introduction



**Symbol of reconciliation—but the completion of the bridge at Mostar in Bosnia belies a still sharply divided city**

**R**econciliation operates at the political, community and individual levels. Politically, in the Northern Ireland context, reconciliation could be seen as embodied in the negotiations that led to the Belfast agreement. This process of seeking a political solution (or, at least, a degree of coexistence) could be said to have brought political stability, albeit still contested, limited and fraught. If this is to be embedded, however, a much deeper process is needed. Institutions have to be rebuilt, democracy resuscitated and reconciliation fostered between old enemies (van der Merwe, 2000).

Competing understandings of reconciliation are apparent in most societies coming out of conflict (Hamber, 2002; Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999). Some people see it as a 'soft' concept, a euphemism for the compromises made in tense political talks. Others narrow it to a basic tolerance. Still others see it as a deeply profound process, intertwined with forgiveness and repentance, and often carrying theological overtones. Some community groups understand it to be a

practical programme for re-establishing workable relationships in deeply divided societies, focusing on bringing people into contact with one another and promoting attitudinal change.

Some practitioners have referred to this as a community-building ideology of reconciliation (Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999). This is concerned with relationships that have broken down between and within communities during the conflict, rather than with broad and abstract values of ethnic coexistence and tolerance. Without minimising the individual component of reconciliation, and acknowledging that community relationships are deeply influenced by the political context, this notion looks at reconciliation at the community or local level.

Community projects and initiatives are needed in societies coming out of conflict to facilitate reconstruction of interpersonal relationships. This can be done through the creation of space for direct interventions, such as conflict-resolution initiatives and cross-community projects. These generally aim to build lasting co-operation, entrench peace and

promote mutual understanding.

From this perspective, reconciliation is not defined as a perfect state of unity, where all animosities are miraculously put aside, or an idyllic state of existence, but rather as a process of building and sustaining relationships (Lederach, 1997). Such relationships should contain sufficient trust to manage conflicts between and within communities as they arise. Needless to say, the role of community, voluntary and local-government structures is vital.

Due to the limited success of the 'peace process' in Northern Ireland, reconciliation at this level is incomplete. This is evident in the many localised disputes which continue to emerge. Sectarian division persists, as evidenced by deep residential segregation and continuing tensions in some areas. Broader political conflicts are often linked to local situations, but equally in most societies coming out of conflict localised political conflicts have dynamics of their own. These have to be addressed in their own right to secure a sustainable peace (van der Merwe, 2000).

Local-government structures can be paralysed by entrenched divisions, making 'ordinary' local politics difficult. The election of the mayor and deputy mayor in some councils over the years has highlighted these challenges, with on occasion these two potentially partnered civic leaders sending out instead signals of communal division. In many areas, monuments and memorials (which in other contexts can play a unifying role) have proved incredibly divisive, often severely undermining any attempts at reconciliation: unionists have expected Irish-identifying

Catholics nevertheless to identify with the commemoration of Britain's war dead, while republicans have angered Protestants by erecting unofficial memorials to local IRA members.

At the individual level, the question is equally complex and is bound to how individuals (and, specifically, those most victimised in the past) view reconciliation and their relationships to those they perceive as 'the other'. Many victims remain angry and disenchanted, particularly with the release of politically-motivated prisoners as part of the agreement and where no individual, group or state agency has been held to account.

Some strides have been made in the establishment of victims' groups across Northern Ireland, through support from government and the EU. But questions concerning truth and justice for past atrocities remain outstanding, and guarantees of long-term financial support for initiatives remain elusive (Hamber, Kulle, and Wilson, 2001; Hamber and Wilson, 2003).

Reconciliation is however wider than meeting the needs of victims, important as this is. It should involve the entire society. The Healing Through Remembering (2002) project indicated, following extensive consultation, that addressing the legacy of the conflict should not be confined to those who see themselves as having been primarily involved: politicians, victims and perpetrators. It is necessary to engage the entire society, particularly those who perceive themselves as 'uninvolved'. All institutions and governance structures have a stake in a reconciliation agenda.

**S**tudies of the role of voluntary organisations—and local-government structures—in building reconciliation are generally lacking in societies coming out of conflict. Although ‘track two diplomacy’<sup>1</sup> is gaining momentum, it has not yet been supported as a vital component of peace-making in many societies (Botcharova, 2001). Northern Ireland is no exception, with most research and writing attending to political negotiations, at the expense of reflecting on the role of civil society groups.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the desire to reconcile conflicted societies as an overarching aim is a noble goal, but exactly how this works is not always clear. The term reconciliation itself remains undefined and is sometimes contested. Examples of good practice at a community level, as distinct from evaluations of programmes and projects, are not widely available. Gaining clarity on what does and does not work is vitally important if we are to sustain and build peace and replicate successful initiatives, in Northern Ireland and in other divided societies.

So in January 2003, Democratic Dialogue embarked on research exploring ‘community reconciliation’ in Northern Ireland. The research was motivated by the observation that the term reconciliation was not well developed in the region, with no agreed definition, despite its increasingly common usage in a range of contexts.

The aim of the study was to explore how reconciliation was conceptualised and implemented at political and community levels in different areas. It also examined how local-government structures created or constrained

opportunities for reconciliation initiatives. Finally, the study aimed to make recommendations as to how reconciliation as a concept could be sharpened, so as to improve practice locally and internationally.

Specifically, the research examined the role voluntary groups played in facilitating reconciliation at community level, their relationships to district councils and the degree to which the councils created an atmosphere conducive to such work. It was hoped this would assist effective partnerships and mutual understanding between sectors, and clarify what reconciliation concretely means and, in the long term, ensure more sustainable reconciliation practice.

In the remainder of this report, we outline the methodology used in the research, before reviewing the literature on reconciliation, internationally and in Northern Ireland. We then present our working definition of reconciliation, discuss how respondents conceptualised the notion and explore their reaction to the proposed definition. We go on to focus on the respondents’ views as to who has responsibility for reconciliation at community level, and then extract and summarise key conclusions. 🐼

**<sup>1</sup> This is defined by Montville as unofficial interactions between members of adversarial groups aimed at resolving the conflict through mustering human and material resources, developing strategies and influencing public opinion (Botcharova, 2001). It recognises the importance of processes at various levels in society, not only official.**

**<sup>2</sup> This is not to say there is no focus on civil society. In fact, most of the funding for peacebuilding has been targeted at this area or what is known as ‘community relations’ work. But there is little focus on how this integrates with macro-concerns and how it shapes the political and social landscape. Talking about the concept of civil society and its role in coming out of conflict is poorly developed in Northern Ireland.**



# Methodology

**F**rom the outset it was clear that to explore conceptual and practical aspects of reconciliation at local levels, we would need to focus on discrete areas.

Given that one of the objectives was to explore how politics at a local level constrains or promotes community-based reconciliation, a focus on district-council areas seemed appropriate. We chose three local authorities as case studies.

To provide an external steer, a research advisory group was set up, which met every two months or so.<sup>1</sup> The group provided vital support, offering valuable strategic direction, suggestions for contacts and guidance on methodology.

Out of Northern Ireland's 26 district-council areas, three were chosen to provide contrast as well as common features. Using the 2001 census, the choice was limited to those with catchment populations of 30,000-60,000. This avoided areas which were very large (and therefore a little unmanageable in terms of getting a true sense of the scope of work undertaken) or quite small (and therefore arguably less active).

The second consideration was geographical spread across Northern Ireland. We chose to focus on areas outside of the large urban centres because these have received less research attention.

The third, and arguably most important, criterion was that the areas chosen should have different demographics: again based on census figures, we chose one with a mainly Catholic population, one that was predominantly Protestant and one that was more evenly balanced.

A shortlist of eight areas was whittled down to three, on the basis of exploration of previous research within each area, levels of voluntary activity, conversations with funders and discussions with community relations officers and other key informants.

Armagh City and District Council, Omagh District Council and Ballymena Borough Council were then selected by the researchers and the advisory group. They offered a broad geographical spread, a range of religious composition and intercommunal tension, and differing community and voluntary-sector activity.

<sup>1</sup> The reference group comprised Sue Williams, Dominic Bryan, Ruth Moore and Libby Keys.

An overview of the three study areas is provided in appendix A.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire formed the main part of the research (see appendix B). The questionnaire was piloted twice before data collection to ensure the questions were clear and rigorous, and addressed all the research themes.

The first pilot was with the research advisory group, who provided valuable feedback. The second was with exemplars of the three main strands of interviewee: two community relations officers (from councils outside the three areas), a voluntary-sector member with responsibility for community-relations work and a councillor with particular interest in peace-building.

In setting up the actual research interviews, our first point of contact was the CRO and other relevant council officials within each area. Initial meetings were set up to explain the project and to answer any queries. Confirmation was sought, and received, from each of the three councils that it would co-operate with the researchers.

A list of potential interviewees was drawn up, in consultation with the CROs and on the basis of the background data previously collated on the areas, to include a range of key stakeholders. Letters were sent to all potential interviewees, explaining the background and aims and objectives, followed up by phone calls. Interviews were conducted in the three areas, with extensive notes being taken and/or the discussion being recorded, depending on the wishes of the interviewee.

Three researchers<sup>2</sup> were involved in conducting the interviews and 58 individuals were interviewed in total, including:

- at least one representative from each political party represented in the council concerned (along with some independents);
- the CRO employed by the council;
- the chief executive and other relevant policy personnel;
- the local strategy partnership manager and members (who have responsibility for the distribution of EU PEACE funding);
- employees and board members of voluntary organisations engaged in what could be considered reconciliation work; and
- victims' groups, ex-prisoners' groups, community-development organisations, networking or umbrella groups, youth groups and local organisations supporting ethnic minorities.

Issues explored included: views and opinions on reconciliation; how it related to one's work and voluntary activities; relevant policies, practices and structures; and relationships between and within sectors and who was deemed to hold ultimate responsibility for building reconciliation (see appendix B). The research generated rich data on the conceptualisation and application of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Although it explored specifics, in terms of relationships between councils and community groups, it also provided a broader picture of local views.

On completion of all interviews, each researcher compiled a report on the case-study area, based on the themes identified. The data from the interviews formed the basis of much of the analysis. This was supplemented by

**<sup>2</sup> We are indebted to Gareth Higgins and Tony MacAulay, who undertook the field research in Armagh and Ballymena respectively. Gráinne Kelly undertook the research in Omagh.**

discussions between the researchers and advisory group to identify cross-cutting themes, commonalities and differences. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviewees, themes were easily extracted, categorised and interpreted by the project team. ”

# Literature review

**R**econciliation has multiple meanings, which can vary from context to context. There is also often confusion between applying the term to the relationship between two individuals and to a broader political context of conflict between groups. At the same time, a detailed yet universal understanding of what reconciliation means is not available. This has prompted the comment that it is 'as old as the hills and at the same time in a pre-infancy stage' (Lederach, 2002: 167).

In the last two decades, however, the term has become increasingly used in the political arena. It has moved from the seminary and the academy into public policy (Helmick and Petersen, 2002). In political negotiations, certainly in the glut of 'peace processes' since 1990, reconciliation is routinely, if often loosely, used to imply a setting aside of past animosities and former enemies working together in the future. It is a commonplace in political rhetoric.

Exactly what this means in practice is seldom clear. Broadly, however, it implies 'developing a mutual conciliatory accommodation

between antagonistic or formerly antagonistic persons or groups' (Kriesberg, cited in Hayner, 2001: 155), and at the core 'is the preparedness of people to anticipate a shared future' (Rigby, 2001: 12).

A range of community projects in countries coming out of conflict, such as dialogue initiatives, also often set reconciliation as one of their goals. Much of this has emerged through individual and interpersonal processes, from which programmes to deal with intergroup conflicts are derived, but this has yet to be fully understood or harnessed to reach predictable outcomes (Lederach, 2002). Importantly, these processes aim a bit deeper than mutual adjustment, seeking resolution or transformation of relationships between individuals and groups.

As a concept, particularly in the political arena, reconciliation has struggled to shake off its religious connotations. From a Christian perspective, reconciliation is not something that can be earned (Boraine, 2000: 360):

It is seen as a gift from God, which can be accepted but is not deserved. However, reconciliation with God always also involves reconciliation with

one's neighbour. There are a number of steps that take place in the reconciliation process: confession, repentance, restitution, and forgiveness. The focus in traditional Christian religion is very much on the covenant between God and the individual.

It is particularly the focus on forgiveness that has caused some practitioners to question the association here between politics and religion. This seems to be prompted by the view, whether correct or not, that when reconciliation is closely tied to religion it can become subsumed into a desire for forgiveness, or to move on too quickly—undermining, for example, the anger or desire for justice of victims of violence. Another objection is that forgiveness in the personal sense does not necessarily require 'the involvement or even the knowledge of those who committed the perceived wrong' (Rigby, 2001: 12). Many victims of politically-motivated violence find this difficult to contemplate.

This issue also concerns human-rights activists, who see truth and justice as critical to any attempts to deal with the past; some argue that reconciliation flows directly from justice. For example, Antonio Cassese (cited in Weinstein and Stover, 2004a: 3-4), first president of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, has written that 'when the Court metes out to the perpetrator his just deserts, then the victims' calls for retribution are met; by dint of dispensation of justice, victims are prepared to be reconciled with their erstwhile tormentors, because they know that the latter have now paid for their crimes; a fully reliable record is established of atrocities so that future generations can remember and be

made fully cognizant of what happened'.

This is not to say that even those coming from a perspective informed by religion might not agree with the need for formal justice or truth as a prerequisite of reconciliation. Reconciliation advocates are quick to point out that when reconciliation is coupled with calls for forgetting or concealing it is spurious (Boraine, 2000). Even those who see forgiveness as linked with reconciliation in some way generally argue that what is 'required is not to forget but to forgive the past and thus be in a position to move forward together' (Rigby, 2001: 12).

Those coming primarily from a human-rights perspective argue that reconciliation is not a religious concept or a matter of forgiving (Bloomfield, 2003). It is more expansive, about transforming relationships damaged through conflict—a complex and difficult process—and not cheap rhetoric.

**A** further debate in the literature concerns the relative merit of the concept of coexistence. Those who prefer it to reconciliation would argue that this is a more realistic goal in societies in conflict. Those advocating coexistence 'seek to establish a baseline for human relations and a climate in which such disagreements might be peacefully discussed and resolved; coexistence is both a means to an end and an end in itself'.<sup>1</sup> Some academics distinguish degrees of coexistence: the height of ambition would be 'integrated societies in which members of different ethnic, racial or religious groups live in harmony with one another', while a minimalist approach

<sup>1</sup> Coexistence Initiative, [www.coexistence.net/coexistence/index.asp?catid=79&page\\_id=164](http://www.coexistence.net/coexistence/index.asp?catid=79&page_id=164)

would ask ‘only that members of such groups live together without killing each other’ (Afzali and Colleton, 2003: 3).

But there are those who see reconciliation as necessary and inevitably more profound. Halpern and Weinstein (2004: 570) argue that empathy is critical to reconciliation, noting that ‘coexistence without empathy is superficial and fragile’, adding: ‘Just below the surface is mistrust, resentment, and even hatred.’ Coexistence, though, might be a first step.

Huyse (2003) argues that there are three stages to reconciliation: replacing fear by non-violent coexistence, building confidence and trust, and moving towards empathy. The final stage, according to Huyse, needs to be accompanied by building democracy and a new socio-economic order. For him, empathy also does not imply forgiveness or absolute harmony, and does not exclude feelings of anger.

Others turn this debate on its head. Enright (2001) argues that reconciliation is the act of two people coming together following separation, but forgiveness on the other hand is more moral in nature and starts as a private act. He contends (Enright, 2001: 31) that ‘one may forgive and not reconcile, but one never truly reconciles without some form of forgiving taking place’.

This view highlights the distinction between thinking about reconciliation in the private sphere or in more collective terms. As for the political realm, our literature review suggests that the debate tends more towards the position of Huyse (2003): reconciliation does not imply seeking the Holy Grail of forgiveness as a prerequisite but is amore subtle and complex

process. Forgiveness can be too easily exploited to hide the truth about the past and goals within the political arena tend to be more modest generally—trying to attain coexistence before considering the more profound process of reconciliation.

According to Huyse, different instruments are needed to develop this broad reconciliation: truth-telling, reparations, restorative justice and processes to promote healing. This approach fits recent developments in ‘transitional justice’, where the concept of reconciliation is increasingly present. Here reconciliation finds itself in the midst of pragmatic political debates about political compromise and the degree of justice possible in countries coming out of conflict.

In the last decade, reconciliation has increasingly become tied more broadly into post-conflict processes. Concepts such as dealing with the past, uncovering the truth, delivering justice and granting reparations to victims have all entered the reconciliation debate. The influence can be seen in truth commissions, in which reconciliation has become central.

In the past, truth commissions were largely seen as investigative mechanisms to generate a definitive account of a conflict, but now their goals are perceived to be wider (Hayner, 2001). It has become routine to consider how truth-recovery mechanisms can contribute to reconciliation. This prompted Hayner (2001: 252) to write that ‘the possibility of holding public hearings, advancing societal and individual healing, and taking part in or promoting a process of reconciliation (however defined) has opened wide the question of means, independent of the final end reached’.



**Luc Huyse—three stages of reconciliation**

Thorough exploration of how the concept of reconciliation is used in transitional justice is beyond the present scope (see, for example, Hamber, 2002), but suffice to say the term has evolved from the individual to the political and policy arenas over the last two decades. This is not to say it is purely political: the idea of mending damaged (or non-existent) relationships among individuals and groups following conflict seems to be central.

Most practitioners would probably stick to the view that relationships and the rehumanisation of the other (Halpern and Weinstein, 2004) are critical post-conflict, and mechanisms need to be put in place to address them. These can operate at the individual level (say between victim and perpetrator) or between groups (say through dialogue), but the degree to which such work affects the entire society is difficult to gauge. This perspective seems to be a more bottom-up view of reconciliation.

Some remain convinced that national processes of acknowledgment (such as a truth commission) can unlock the possibilities of reconciliation not only for individuals but for nations (Boraine, 2000). This seems to be about starting more top-down processes that can ripple through the society.

**Q**uestions remain, however, as to whether a society can be reconciled *en masse*. Some are sceptical, noting it is problematic to consider societies as having unitary psyches which can be affected by specific processes (Hamber and Wilson, 2002). Those evaluating the impact of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

have also argued that, despite political transformation, relations between political opponents at a community level, coupled with the lack of truth, remain volatile (van der Merwe, 2002).

Although national reconciliation does not automatically transform communities, the value of national processes (which also include reparations strategies for victims or even trials) cannot be overestimated. They can help create conditions conducive to better relationships, building social, intergroup and individual reconciliation over the long term.

Other writers talk about the various processes and components of reconciliation but are less specific about the mechanisms which might be entailed. For example, some see reconciliation as being built on the interlinked dynamics of forgiveness, repentance, truth and justice (Stevens, 2004).

Perhaps the most well-known example of this is Lederach's view that reconciliation is the process where truth, mercy, justice and peace meet (Lederach, 1997: 29):

Truth is the longing for acknowledgment of wrong and the validation of painful loss and experience, but it is coupled with Mercy, which articulates the need for acceptance, letting go, and a new beginning. Justice represents the search for individual and group rights, for social restructuring and restitution, but it is linked with Peace which underscores the need for interdependence, well-being and security.

Others, however, would disaggregate reconciliation into component parts.

Weinstein and Stover (2004b) take an interesting approach, claiming that 'reclamation' better captures what is needed for social repair

in post-war countries: contained within it is the rejection of wrongdoing, the restoration of ownership (in the broadest sense) and making the land safe for cultivation. For them, reclamation needs to incorporate elements of culture, identity, memory and history.

**D**espite such differences, for these practitioners and academics reconciliation certainly extends deeper than coexistence. This is expressed in a range of ways and writers stress different elements in the process.

For example, Porter (2003: 67) argues: 'Reconciliation refers to a set of activities—engaging with others and embracing our world—that are conducted in a certain spirit—most notably one of openness—with an aim to expanding horizons, healing divisions, and articulating common purposes. And he adds later (Porter, 2003: 94): 'Reconciliation requires three main things: (1) it requires *fair interactions* between members of opposing groups; (2) it requires that we overcome our antagonistic divisions by occupying *common ground*; and (3) it requires the presence of a society in which all citizens have a sense of *belonging*.'

Or as Stevens (2004: 42-43) puts it,

Reconciliation is not just about an accommodation of various interests and aspirations in a mutually acceptable way. It is concerned with the social reconstruction of a society and thus it is also concerned with the rebuilding of the moral order. Reconciliation involves social transformation: it deals with the hurts, resentments and enmities that exist (the task of repair and healing) and seeks the transformation of relationships

with all that implies at the spiritual, psychological, social, economic and political levels. Reconciliation requires *metanoia*, a conversion of mind and heart. It demands particular attitudes and practices.

According to Assefa (2001: 340), reconciliation entails: '[h]onest acknowledgment of the harm/injury each party has inflicted on the other; sincere regrets and remorse for the injury done; readiness to apologize for one's role in inflicting the injury; readiness of the conflicting parties to let go of the anger and bitterness caused by the conflict and the injury; commitment by the offender not to repeat the injury; sincere effort to redress past grievances that caused the conflict and compensate the damage caused to the extent possible; and entering into a new, mutually enriching relationship'. Reconciliation then refers to the new relationship that emerges as a consequence.

For these three writers, reconciliation is a dynamic process, requiring a range of actions, and is primarily about the building or rebuilding of relationships. As Lederach (1997: 26) has put it, reconciliation is essentially about the 'often-neglected notion that relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution ... reconciliation is not pursued by seeking innovative ways to disengage or minimize the conflicting groups' affiliations, but instead is built on mechanisms that engage the sides of a conflict with each other as humans-in-relationship'. Others go as far as arguing that reconciliation is not only about relationships but has to begin at the 'level of the individual—neighbour to neighbour, then house to house, and finally, community to community (Halpern and



Weinstein, 2004: 567).

Another common theme in the literature is that reconciliation is not straightforward. Lederach (1997: 81) talks about the paradoxes implicit within it:

First, in an overall sense, reconciliation promotes an encounter between the open expression of the painful past, on the one hand, and the search for the articulation of a long-term, interdependent future, on the other hand. Second, reconciliation provides a place for truth and mercy to meet, where concerns for exposing what has happened *and* for letting go in favour of renewed relationship are validated and embraced. Third, reconciliation recognises the need to give time and place to both justice and peace, where redressing the wrong is held together with the envisioning of a common, connected future.

Thus, reconciliation entails trying to address these complex paradoxes. And we cannot escape the fact that reconciliation is a morally loaded concept and different people will bring their own ideological predispositions. An individual's understanding of reconciliation is generally informed by their basic beliefs about the world.

Different ideologies of reconciliation can be identified (Hamber, 2002; Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999). A religious ideology often emphasises the rediscovery of a new conscience of individuals and society through moral reflection, repentance, confession and rebirth. A human-rights approach might stress regulating social interaction through the rule of law and preventing certain violations recurring. And an intercommunal understanding might focus on bridging divides

between different cultures and identities.

Again we see a process much deeper than building a society in which individuals can exist beside one another. So the long-term, complex and difficult nature of reconciliation emerges strongly from the literature. The idea that reconciliation is a process (Huyse, 2003)—and a voluntary process at that—rather than an outcome is also evident.

This is important because the concept is often criticised as utopian advocacy of a harmonious society. On the contrary, some authors contend that conflicts are part of the human condition and reconciliation is about dealing with the anger of victims, for example (Huyse, 2003), and embracing the paradoxes it implies (Lederach, 1997).

**L**anguage has always been fraught with controversy on the island of Ireland. It has been used as an indicator of perceived political and/or religious affiliations. It has resulted in an escalation of tensions and a breakdown of already fragile relationships. The language of 'peace' has not escaped the minefield of contested terminology—in which the connotations of certain words and phrases within different communities, and their popularity and appropriateness, wax and wane over time.

The search for an agreed or acceptable language is important in resolving any conflict. Phrases such as 'community relations', 'reconciliation', 'peacebuilding' and, more recently, 'good relations' or 'community cohesion' have all been used to describe attempts to address the divisions in and around Northern Ireland.

It is often difficult to track their entry into the lexicon or to be sure about distinctions others may make between them. Is there something inherently different between self-styled 'community relations' and 'reconciliation' projects?

For the purposes of this report it is not necessary to rehearse the history of the Northern Ireland conflict. But it is important to place reconciliation initiatives in context.

The 1970s were marked by violence and intercommunal unrest. In reaction, complementary initiatives were established to sustain strained relationships, mend fractured ones and build anew across the sectarian divide.

These set in train a government response, with the establishment of the Community Relations Commission, modelled on the UK body set up to address racism. But the commission made little impact on the worsening relationships and, oddly, was disbanded at the behest of the short-lived power-sharing executive of 1974. While some community and faith-based initiatives were maintained in the face of intensifying violence and segregation, community-relations policy initiatives fell dormant for over a decade (Hughes and Carmichael, 1998).

By the mid-80s unfolding political events, including the Enniskillen bomb in 1987 (which killed 11 people and injured dozens) prompted non-governmental organisations and bodies such as the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights to renew pressure on the government to address community relations in policy terms. In 1987, the Central Community Relations Unit was established. Its objective was to formulate, improve and review government policies on community relations and it

was directly answerable to the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Policies on equality, cross-community contact and supporting 'cultural traditions' followed.

In 1989, a community-relations programme was introduced, funded by the UK government and implemented through local authorities. This was based on a commitment to 'bring the two sides of Northern Ireland's community towards greater understanding' and predicated on the notion that contact would assist in improving relationships and building greater tolerance (Central Community Relations Unit, 1992). This District Council Community Relations Programme continues to this day, and CROs are employed in each district council to administer it.

In 1990, the Community Relations Council was formed, as an independent company and registered charity, with a remit to promote better community relations between the two main 'traditions'. The council engages in the administration of funding programmes, advice and information, awareness-raising and advocacy, and policy development. It will play an enhanced role in the context of the *A Shared Future* policy framework discussed below.

While community development and cultural diversity were supported during the 90s, initiatives such as the district-council programme and projects funded by the CRC were largely based on the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Hewstone and Brown, 1986; Pettigrew, 1998), which has dominated community relations for the past two decades. Critics have argued this is superficial. They have accused the government of promoting an assimilationist agenda that

applied little more than a 'sticking plaster' to the conflict (Hughes and Donnelly, 2002). Republicans have continually criticised the field more broadly, claiming that it misses the root causes of the conflict (Coiste na n-Iarchimi, 2003).

In light of the 'peace process' and the agreement reached in 1998, community relations has developed to address an 'equality agenda' and promotion of cultural and political pluralism. Other policy initiatives over the years, including needs-based housing allocation, fair-employment legislation, 'targeting social need' and (modestly) supporting integrated education have all helped change the social and economic context. But public attitudes surveys<sup>2</sup> indicate that optimism about relations between the two main 'traditions' remains low—though this has latterly improved—while residential segregation is increasing and schooling continues to be sharply divided.

The emergence of strong advocates for victims of the conflict and former combatants has changed the dynamics of the reconciliation debate in recent years. A range of steps to address the needs of victims have been taken. A Victims Liaison Unit was set up in the Northern Ireland Office in June 1998<sup>3</sup> and, following devolution, a Victims Unit in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in July 2000. To date, the NIO and the OFMDFM claim to have spent (or allocated) over £20 million on victims-related projects. From the EU, £5.8 million was made available for 2002-2004, although spending can continue to 2006. Most of these developments have been orientated towards community groups, mainly self-help and counselling organisations. An initial £3

million core funding scheme was set up, and a further £3 million allocated in 2003-05 for these groups. A further two-year extension was coming on stream at time of writing.

A range of other policy-orientated initiatives have also taken place. These have been wrapped up in a victims strategy, promulgated in 2001 and subject to revision during a consultation in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

But official responses to the conflict have been criticised as slow and limited. There was until recently a 'policy silence' *vis-à-vis* victims in health, social services, education and other arenas (Hamilton, Thomson, and Smyth, 2002). This was acknowledged by the then NIO minister Des Browne in 2003: reflecting on three decades of conflict, he told the *Irish Echo* (February 19<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> 2003) that 'in all that time there were no policies in relation to victims'.

Victim-support services only began in earnest after the release of politically-motivated prisoners as part of the agreement. This left many victims' groups feeling, at least initially, that support for them was a sop for denial of justice. Over the years, this led to a polarisation (in most but not all areas) between ex-prisoner initiatives and work with victims. Divisions also emerged within victims' groups, over definitions of legitimate victimhood.

It has become common for some groups to refer to themselves as 'real' or 'innocent' victims (Morrissey and Smyth, 2002). Individuals from different sides have alleged that there is a hierarchy of victimhood, claiming that their specific victimisation is given lower official priority than certain others'. There have also been claims that ex-prisoners have received more

<sup>2</sup> See [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) for full details of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey.

<sup>3</sup> This office was closed in January 2005.

<sup>4</sup> The consultation document is available at [www.victims.ni.gov.uk/consult.pdf](http://www.victims.ni.gov.uk/consult.pdf).

attention than victims, though ex-prisoners' groups have argued that funding for them has decreased as the counterposition between victims' and ex-prisoners' organisations has sharpened.

Over the last two years there has, at least at the individual level and at least in some circles, been growing participation in processes and dialogues aimed at narrowing this gap. Contacts between ex-prisoners' and victims' groups have been growing. Victims' organisations too have started to articulate their needs in a manner which chimes with international debates on reconciliation. Thus DD has routinely found that victims tend not to divorce truth, justice, the labelling of responsibility for violations, compensation and official acknowledgment from healing and reconciliation (Hamber *et al.*, 2001; Hamber and Wilson, 2003).

Therein lies the challenge: setting up sufficient support services for all victims of political violence could be envisaged, but integrating their other needs—some, such as the right to justice, perhaps overridden in the name of peace—is infinitely more complex. But, as we have indicated, reconciliation is far larger than a focus on victims and offenders alone.

**A**s we have also made clear, the terminology around reconciliation in Northern Ireland is very fluid, with no clear distinctions made among various concepts in play. There are rafts of publications on the conflict and the search for peace: academic articles, books by journalists, policy papers and the output of NGOs. There is a wealth of literature on conflict resolution and community

relations, from prisoner releases to mutual understanding programmes in schools.

Literature focusing specifically on 'reconciliation' as a concept has been published over many years, much of it generated by faith-based groups and firmly rooted in theological teachings. It is only recently, however, that the term has started to taken on a wider meaning.

In 1994, the proceedings of a seminar were collated by Michael Hurley in a collection, *Reconciliation in Religion and Society*. The contributions explored the concept of reconciliation, described as being 'vague and ill-defined' (Hurley, 1994: 2). The book places reconciliation within a Christian framework, addressing it from the perspectives of history, justice, ecumenism, ecology, politics and gender.

An action research project by the Irish School of Ecumenics appeared in 2001 as *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. Its authors, Clegg and Liechty, investigated sectarianism and the role of Christian religion in conflict and reconciliation. They see reconciliation as 'the cornerstone of our understanding of the main goal and dynamics of moving beyond sectarianism' (Clegg and Liechty, 2001: 43). They reflect that the concept is 'criticised from at least two main angles: some politically-orientated critics see reconciliation as a weak-minded, establishmentarian [*sic*] alternative to the real task of justice and structural change, while its conservative religious critics condemn reconciliation as a matter of crying peace where there is no peace'.

As for others, their own understanding is based on the interlocking dynamics of

forgiveness, repentance, truth and justice, 'understood in part as religiously-rooted virtues, but also as basic dynamics of human interaction, including public life and therefore politics' (Clegg and Liechty, 2001: 44).

In 2002, the Faith and Politics Group published *A Time to Heal: Perspectives on Reconciliation*. This was based on nearly two decades of reflection by clergy and laypersons on the meaning of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Yet while they grapple with the meaning of reconciliation they admit (Faith and Politics Group, 2002: 5): 'It remains hard ... to give the word meaning and practical content ... reconciliation as a word has been shamelessly misused, to slide away from issues of injustice and rightful disturbance. It has been used to quieten people down and lead them away from their situation.'

While placing significant emphasis on the Christian vision of reconciliation, the concept of 'social reconciliation' is explored. This is seen as involving dealing with the past, grieving, story-telling, forgiveness, acknowledgement, restitution, punishment, justice and trust.

The most recent faith-based contribution, by David Stevens of the Corrymeela Community, is entitled *The Land of Unlikeness: Explorations into Reconciliation* (Stevens, 2004). It poses the question 'What can the Christian faith bring to the human search for reconciliation?' and it offers some theological perspectives and reflections on biblical texts.

A range of other publications have focused on Christian perspectives on reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Detailed exploration is beyond the present scope (see Love, 1995; Monaghan, P and E B, 1998; Morrow, 2003;

Thomson, 1998; Wells, 1999).

Notable departures from the theologically-based literature on reconciliation in Northern Ireland are the 2003 work by Norman Porter, *The Elusive Quest: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, a report by ADM/CPA<sup>5</sup> and the report of the Healing Through Remembering project.

Porter (2003: 12) argues for the importance of reconciliation as a moral and political ideal, which 'makes demands on how we live and think as social, political and cultural beings'. Reconciliation, he believes (Porter, 2003: 8), 'entails embracing and engaging others who are different from us in a spirit of openness and with a view to expanding our horizons, healing our divisions and articulating common purposes ... If taken seriously, it disturbs prejudice, disrupts practices and queries priorities.'

There have also been some practical attempts to look at the issue. ADM/CPA in Monaghan, an intermediary funding body in the border counties, undertook a consultation which engendered the following definition of reconciliation (ADM/CPA, 2003, p.27): 'Reconciliation is the term for the process whereby past trauma, injury and suffering is acknowledged and healing/restorative action is pursued; relationship breakdown is addressed and new sustainable relationships created; and where the culture and structures which gave rise to conflict and estrangement are transformed with a view to creating an equitable and interdependent community.'

ADM/CPA also produced a helpful matrix (ADM/CPA, undated) that divides projects into different stages along a continuum towards reconciliation. The matrix describes the depth

<sup>5</sup> a body established by Area Development Management, an intermediary company set up by the republic's government in agreement with the European Commission to support local social and economic development, and the statutory Combat Poverty Agency to distribute EU PEACE monies (see [www.adm-cpa.com](http://www.adm-cpa.com))

of reconciliation (y-axis) as increasing from (1) contact, awareness and understanding to (2) joint projects to (3) raising conflictual issues and, finally, to (4) changing culture and structure. It also highlights types of reconciliation work (x-axis) as (1) healing (2) building relationships and (3) reconstruction. Various forms of practical reconciliation activity can be slotted into the matrix.

For example, ADM/CPA (undated) argues that reconciliation practice might minimally or initially include: 'Reciprocal visits; Ecumenical services; Joint commemorative events; Documentary and cultural affirmation; Declaration of desire and/or intention to cease hostilities/estrangement'. (This would be located at the intersection of contact, awareness and understanding in terms of reconciliation depth and 'healing' as type of work.)

Deeper reconciliation practice might include: 'Liberating structures; Innovative social technology; Trade unions and law reform; Civil society; Use of technology to deepen democracy and social partnership ownership and participation; Equity, diversity, interdependence, proofing/monitoring of social structures and institutions'. (This would be located at the intersection of changing culture and structure in terms of reconciliation depth and 'reconstruction' as type of work.)

Healing Through Remembering (2002), a cross-community project that undertook an extensive public consultation on ways to deal with the past, also refers to reconciliation in its report. It notes that although strategies to deal with the past can be divisive they are integral to reconciliation. But creating unrealistic

expectations of closure or reconciliation, without dealing with issues such as anger or truth, is undesirable.

In this sense the report is much closer to some international perspectives that see reconciliation as linked to a range of strategies. Healing Through Remembering (2002) refers to public acknowledgment, potential truth-recovery mechanisms, a Day of Reflection, a living memorial museum, commemorations shared by communities and story-telling—all essential yet challenging tasks in societies coming out of conflict.

**T**he following quotation (Eyben, Wilson and Morrow, 2000: 11) summarises some of the major shifts in the reconciliation debate in Northern Ireland from the late 90s:

Until the ceasefires of 1994, community relations work necessarily concentrated on groups outside formal politics, often small and consisting of committed pioneers and on policy initiatives intended to facilitate long-term structural change. Following the ceasefires, reconciliation ceased to be the Cinderella of public policy and became the dominant theme of party political, government and international interest. Funding for economic and social initiatives aimed at reconciliation was offered by the European Commission. The British Government sought a peace dividend and the Clinton administration backed up its direct political involvement with support for economic investment and social change especially targeted at women and community development. A much larger reconciliation industry then emerged with substantial international backing.

Much of the approach to peace and reconciliation became synonymous with the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland, which has come to dominate the scene.

This programme has had two main phases, known as PEACE I and PEACE II (with the latter now extended as 'PEACE II+'). These are unique EU-funded programmes, covering the six counties of Northern Ireland and the six counties of the republic around the border (Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo).

PEACE I was introduced by the European Commission in 1995 and supported more than 13,000 projects in Northern Ireland, focusing on job creation, social inclusion, urban and rural regeneration, and cross-border co-operation. Approximately €536 million was made available. The strategic aim of the programme was 'to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation by increasing economic development and employment, promoting urban and rural regeneration, developing Cross-Border co-operation and extending social inclusion'.

Money was distributed through central government, 26 District Partnership Boards (based on district-council boundaries) and Intermediary Funding Bodies, which undertook to allocate specific measures of the programme. It provided significant economic and social investment in Northern Ireland and the border counties.

Although many successes were recorded at the community level, debates rage as to the programme's effectiveness in peacebuilding and

reconciliation, and specifically its ability to address the causes of the conflict and to confront core issues arising. There was, it was argued (Harvey, 2003: 12), 'insufficient embedding of concepts of peace and reconciliation in many measures of the programme'. Reflecting on PEACE I, Harvey (2003: 22) wrote:

Although an understanding of issues of peace and reconciliation undoubtedly deepened during the PEACE I programme, this was not the same as the achievement of consensus within Northern Ireland on the nature of the conflict and the nature of the 'solution' ... Although PEACE I had done much to normalise cross-community (and cross-border) work, there was not full agreement on a model of cross-community and single-identity work. Any successor programme had to operate in an environment in which the most basic issues of the troubles remained unresolved.

A mid-term review of the programme found, among a range of issues, that groups had considerable difficulty measuring impacts on reconciliation and were given little guidance on how to do so (Coopers and Lybrand, 1997). In the same year, the three Northern Ireland members of the European Parliament, who had strongly lobbied the European Commission in support of such a programme, submitted their own mid-term review (Paisley, Hume, and Nicholson, 1997). While praising it overall, they similarly highlighted the programme's complexity and the problems of defining, and thus assessing, reconciliation.

In *Taking Risks for Peace*, also published that year, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (1997b),<sup>6</sup> one of the intermediary funding bodies for the PEACE programme, highlighted

<sup>6</sup> now the  
Community  
Foundation for  
Northern Ireland  
([www.communityfoundationni.org](http://www.communityfoundationni.org))

the different interpretations of it. These ranged from an investment in community capacity, through tackling social exclusion to a focus on conflict resolution. It expressed concerns as to how peace and reconciliation was being defined in the broader political and constitutional context (Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, 1997b).

In a later publication, the NIVT proposed that the focus on bottom-up development and community activities be maintained, with priority given to social inclusion. But it suggested (NIVT, 1997a: 10): 'Greater efforts must be made to discuss and refine what is meant by and involved in the process of peace and reconciliation and to adopt effective and imaginative ways of monitoring the impact of the programme in supporting this process.'

Following an extensive review, internal to the European Commission and more publicly involving the many IFBs, a new five-year PEACE programme was belatedly introduced in 2000. Approximately €500 million was allocated, of which €400 million was to be spent in Northern Ireland (the remainder in the border counties), supplemented by government contributions.

After laborious consultations, briefings and draft documents, involving government departments, political parties and IFBs—as well as the voluntary, farming and business sectors—on both sides of the border, a new programme was finally adopted by the commission in March 2001. The five priority areas (in order of most to least expenditure) were to be: economic renewal; social integration, inclusion and reconciliation; locally based regeneration and development strategies; an outward and forward-looking region; and cross-border

co-operation.

In addition, three 'distinctiveness criteria' were introduced, which each supported project had to meet to qualify. These were: 'addressing the legacy of the conflict', 'taking the opportunities arising from the peace' and 'promoting reconciliation'.

This programme, PEACE II, has been managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).<sup>7</sup> The programme is worth over €707 million (larger than initial allocations) and was designed to address the legacy of the 'troubles'. It specifically aims to encourage 'progress towards a peaceful and stable society and to promote reconciliation'. At the time of writing, 4,600 projects had been supported.

The SEUPB claims its research suggests the programme has been largely successful. In a press release at the end of 2004 the body noted:<sup>8</sup>

Headline figures from the research show that 96% of participants in the PEACE II Programme are more likely to have at least some friends within another community compared to 86% of the total NI population. In terms of trust, 80% of PEACE II participants feel that members of the other community can be trusted regardless of community background, compared to just 56% of the total NI population. Evidence also suggests that PEACE II Programme participants cross the border more often than the rest of the population at 88% compared to just 61% of the total NI population.

An extension to the PEACE II programme has been agreed, following a recommendation in October 2004 by the commission to that effect. The SEUPB also completed a consultation on the

<sup>7</sup> [www.seupb.org](http://www.seupb.org)

<sup>8</sup> [www.seupb.org/news\\_diff.htm](http://www.seupb.org/news_diff.htm)



potential extension. This will entail a further two years of funding.

In the SEUPB's consultation the need to define reconciliation was again stressed. Some of the findings of the research that forms the basis of this report and the initial papers (Hamber and Kelly, 2004; Kelly and Hamber, 2004) coming out of it were presented to the SEUPB, and early evidence suggests that reconciliation as a concept will receive a far greater focus in the extension.

The various IFBs applied the distinctiveness and reconciliation criteria as set out in the PEACE II programme strategy. But in the absence of a clear definition of reconciliation from the EU, each IFB defined the term—and, therefore, what activities could be viewed as contributing to reconciliation—differently (Harvey, 2003).

Aside from the EU and the funding lines offered by the London and Dublin governments, other major philanthropic organisations and funding bodies have supported reconciliation work on the island, including the Northern Ireland Fund for Reconciliation, the International Fund for Ireland and Atlantic Philanthropies<sup>9</sup> (which has a 'human rights and reconciliation' strand).

Through the IFI the United States provides economic assistance. The fund promotes economic and social advancement, and encourages contact, dialogue and reconciliation. It supports economic development north and south in Ireland, with priority given to new investments that create jobs and reconstruct disadvantaged areas. Clearly the language of reconciliation has been embraced by grant-giving bodies, despite

differing interpretations. But what about society more generally?

It is difficult to measure the usage of a term like reconciliation in common parlance.

Instead, we explored how it is, or is not, used in certain contexts in Northern Ireland, through an audit of documents and debates.

The most relevant recent development has been the government-led consultation assessing organisations' and individuals' views on policies to address 'community relations'. Published in January 2003, *A Shared Future: A Consultation Paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland*<sup>10</sup> received more than 500 formal responses from *inter alia* political parties, voluntary organisations, statutory agencies, churches, business, district councils and strategy partnerships.

We examined a sample of responses (including all those from political parties and the main community/voluntary organisations working on relevant issues) to identify words or phrases used *vis-à-vis* improving relations in Northern Ireland. The document tended to use the phrases 'community relations' and 'good relations' interchangeably, without providing any definition or explanation.

In the responses analysed 'community relations' was the most common reference, with 'good relations' coming a comfortable second. 'Reconciliation' was seldom used. On the few occasions that it was it tended to appear with 'peace'—undoubtedly an influence of the EU funding programme. Interestingly, some respondents criticised *A Shared Future* for failing to define such terms as these, asserting that a shared understanding of their meanings and

<sup>9</sup> [www.atlanticphilanthropies.org](http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org)

<sup>10</sup> document and responses available at [www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk](http://www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk)

implications was necessary.

The response submitted by the Community Relations Council began in this vein. Yet it proceeded to privilege the term ‘reconciliation’ over ‘community relations’ for the most part, without itself explaining why.

The final policy document, *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*,<sup>11</sup> was published by the OFMDFM in March 2005. In his foreword, the then Northern Ireland secretary, Paul Murphy, wrote (Community Relations Unit, 2005, p.3):

The essence of reconciliation is about moving away from relationships that are built on mistrust and defence to relationships rooted in mutual recognition and trust. Where relationships have been shaped by threat and fear over a long period we must make changes. We must make those changes through policy and law to address that threat and fear. In my view the absence of trust will set back both economic and social development; we will fail to realise the talents of our more diverse society.

The report did refer to criticisms of the lack of clarity over terminology and attempted to address them thus (Community Relations Unit, 2005, p.63): “‘Community relations’ refers specifically to division between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. ‘Good Relations’ refers to Section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which includes persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.’

But the document continued to use both terms throughout, without these distinctions being clearly followed. Interestingly the term ‘reconciliation’ all but disappeared from the

body of the text, and when used was directly in relation to victims/survivors of the conflict.

This might be seen as reflecting its politically exigent character. ‘Community relations’ can be (mis-)represented in superficial and non-threatening terms, betokening a view of the Northern Ireland conflict rooted in individual ‘ignorance’ and ‘prejudice’. Equally, ‘good relations’ can be articulated as a routine procedure to be followed by public authorities as part of the ‘equality agenda’ embracing principally section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act. ‘Reconciliation’ can simultaneously appear more challenging and less predictable.

We also undertook an analysis of the Belfast agreement. Interestingly, the text of the agreement<sup>12</sup> makes scant reference to reconciliation. It appears twice in the prefatory Declaration of Support (The Agreement, 1998: 1-2). This affirms: ‘The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of human rights for all.’

Later it goes on: ‘We must acknowledge the substantial differences between our continuing, and equally legitimate, political aspirations. However, we will endeavour to strive in every practical way towards reconciliation and rapprochement within our framework of democratic and agreed arrangements.’

No definition of reconciliation in this context is provided, and the term seems to be used

<sup>11</sup> available at [www.asharedfuture.ni.gov.uk/finalgrs.pdf](http://www.asharedfuture.ni.gov.uk/finalgrs.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> available at [www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf](http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf)

as a loose qualifier for setting aside past animosities and working together in a new dispensation. In the body of the agreement, however, it is used more specifically: the importance of addressing the needs of victims is acknowledged in building reconciliation, as is the funding of work in this arena.

The section entitled 'Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity' has two sub-headings, 'Human Rights' and 'Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.' 'Reconciliation and Victims of Violence' is awarded its own section within the 'Human Rights' element and it concludes (The Agreement, 1998: 18):

The participants believe that it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation ... The participants recognise and value the work being done by many organisations to develop reconciliation and mutual understanding and respect between and within communities and traditions, in Northern Ireland and between North and South, and they see such work as having a vital role in consolidating peace and political agreement. Accordingly, they pledge their continuing support for such organisations and will positively examine the case for enhanced financial assistance for the work of reconciliation. An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing.

Clearly, therefore, while reconciliation as a concept is present in the public/official domain, it is painted with broad brushstrokes. To see if it is used any more specifically, we

analysed debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly, while it met between November 1999 and October 2002, using the Official Record (Hansard).

Excluding common references to the EU Peace and Reconciliation Programme, 'reconciliation' was referred to during assembly debates. There was, however a discernible difference between the parties, with SDLP members referring to the term 75 times, the Democratic Unionist Party and Women's Coalition 18 times each, Alliance Party members 13, Sinn Féin ten and the United Kingdom Unionist Party eight. This cursory analysis suggests the SDLP has more fully integrated reconciliation into its official language, while others tended towards a more *à la carte* use of related terms or did not favour it.

Thus we can see that 'reconciliation' is used sparingly at the policy and political level, and remains largely undefined. Much confusion remains between concepts such as 'community relations' and 'reconciliation', and at times they are used interchangeably, without any real sense as to why one is chosen over another or any nuances this might imply.

**R**econciliation is a concept that has a fairly long history within the Northern Ireland context. It has clearly moved, as in the international debate, from the realm of the religious into mainstream policy-making. But its meaning remains vague and lacking in practical definition.

Despite the 'peace and reconciliation' programme, and more recent attempts to try to define it, there is little sign that the confusion

over terminology is decreasing, particularly with the admixture of terms such as ‘good relations’ and ‘community cohesion’. Much work remains to be done in conceptual clarification—and, more importantly, in assessing the impact on practice and on how the success of reconciliation initiatives is to be measured. ”

# A working definition

**T**o ensure a profound discussion of the theme of reconciliation during our research, and specifically in interviews, it was important for us to have a clear sense of the parameters. Given the complicated history of terminology in Northern Ireland, we felt it would be grossly unfair to probe respondents on what they thought reconciliation was, without us doing some work on the term ourselves.

To stimulate discussion and to try to frame the reconciliation debate, we therefore presented interviewees with a definition of reconciliation we felt applicable to societies emerging from conflict. This would provide a focus for discussion, help identify the different and relevant elements, give respondents an opportunity to debate different views, and explore the possibility of a conceptual approach to reconciliation that was practically applicable to aspects of their work or experience. It gave us the opportunity to test our hypotheses against the expertise of those working on the ground in our case-study areas.

We first reviewed a range of existing definitions. While all those we explored were

extremely useful and informative, many were wordy and complex and often quite inaccessible. Motivated by a desire to present a set of simple, yet comprehensive, elements that made up reconciliation, we devised our own working definition.

Before exploring this, however, we also had to consider how reconciliation related to ‘peacebuilding’, as the concepts are often conflated, particularly as a result of the ‘peace and reconciliation’ programme. Peacebuilding became increasingly popular over the 90s, but there are few common understandings of this term either.

It came to the fore following its use by Boutros Boutros-Ghali—then United Nations secretary-general—in announcing his *Agenda for Peace* in 1992. Definitions, however, seem to be context-bound and vary among voluntary groups, communities at large, policy-makers, politicians and funders.

This picture is complicated further when the concept of reconciliation is introduced. We see peacebuilding as a process that is much more expansive. *Peacebuilding* is also different from

*peacemaking*.

Ropers (1995: 37) provides a broad definition of these terms:

*Peacemaking* is understood to mean the attempt to tackle some concrete problem in a process that generally begins with a difference of interests, proceeds in the form of negotiations, and in the end—if successfully dealt with—leads to an agreement concerning the conduct of both sides. *Peacebuilding*, on the other hand, covers a wider area and, in most cases, a longer time-scale. Its aim is a change in the social structures underlying the conflict, and a change in the attitudes of the parties to the conflict.

Peacebuilding, according to Morris (undated), ‘involves a full range of approaches, processes, and stages needed for transformation toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships and governance modes and structures’. And she continues:

Peacebuilding includes building legal and human rights institutions as well as fair and effective governance and dispute resolution processes and systems. To be effective, peacebuilding activities require careful and participatory planning, co-ordination among various efforts, and sustained commitments by both local and donor partners.

The idea of peacebuilding as a long-term process is shared by many practitioners internationally. As was mentioned in the review of the literature, most see reconciliation and the re-establishing or mending of damaged interpersonal and social relations as a vital component.

Thus, we see peacebuilding, as distinct from peacemaking, as a process or series of

processes that seek to establish peace and prevent violence from continuing or re-emerging, by addressing the root causes and the consequences of conflict. This can involve building institutions, community development, socio-economic development, social reconstruction, reconciliation, empowerment, mechanisms to address the past and developing effective governance. Different peacebuilding strategies will apply at the individual, community and political levels.

Reconciliation, first and foremost, is a component of peacebuilding. We understand, however, that addressing relationships specifically, and to some degree achieving limited reconciliation, is necessary in achieving any aspect of the peacebuilding process. Thus reconciliation is implicit in all peacebuilding processes. We represent this graphically in appendix C.

**I**n developing our definition of reconciliation, we began by identifying what we felt were the main elements. We set out to incorporate fundamentals identified from other sources. We explored definitions from dictionaries, handbooks, academic journals and books by practitioners. We acknowledge a number of texts (ADM/CPA, 2003; Assefa, 2001; Bloomfield, Barnes and Huyse, 2003; Hamber, 2002; Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; Lederach, 1997; Porter, 2003; Rigby, 2001; van der Merwe, 1999).

The result is the working definition below, which is by its nature incomplete. We were comfortable with this imperfection, which we viewed as a useful—possibly provocative—tool to stimulate further discussion, rather than

having made a definitive statement which had to be defended.

We see reconciliation starting from the premiss that to build peace relationships requires attention. Reconciliation is the *process* of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships and this includes a range of activities. It is a voluntary act that cannot be imposed (Bloomfield *et al*, 2003).

A reconciliation process generally involves five interwoven and related strands:—

**1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society.** The development of a vision of a shared future requires the involvement of the whole society, at all levels. Although individuals may have different opinions or political beliefs, the articulation of a common vision of an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society is a critical part of any reconciliation process.

**2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past.** The hurt, losses, truths and suffering of the past need to be acknowledged, with mechanisms providing for justice, healing, restitution or reparation, and restoration (including apologies if necessary and steps aimed at redress). To build reconciliation, individuals and institutions need to acknowledge their own role in the conflicts of the past, accepting and learning from it in a constructive way so as to guarantee non-repetition.

**3. Building positive relationships.** Relationships require to be built or renewed following violent conflict, addressing issues of trust, prejudice and intolerance in the process. This results in accepting commonalities and

differences, and embracing and engaging with those who are different from us.

**4. Significant cultural and attitudinal change.** Changes in how people relate to, and their attitudes towards, one another are also key. The culture of suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence is broken down and opportunities and space opened up in which people can hear and be heard. A culture of respect for human rights and human difference is developed, creating a context where each citizen becomes an active participant in society and feels a sense of belonging.

**5. Substantial social, economic and political change.** The social, economic and political structures which gave rise to conflict and estrangement are identified, reconstructed or addressed, and transformed.

Although we did not explore these formally in the research, two additional points developed in the literature section merit reiteration. First, a reconciliation process always contains paradoxes and even contradictions. It is neither neat nor easy, and can in itself seem incongruous. Lederach (1997) notes that aspects can stand in tension with one another—such as the articulation of a long-term, interdependent future on the one hand and the need for justice on the other. Reconciliation is the process of trying to address these complex paradoxes.

We are aware that the strands of our working definition can themselves create tensions in the same vein: reconciliation requires dealing with the past but at the same time participation in developing a shared vision. Reconciliation is both a backward- and a forward-looking

process.

Secondly, we cannot escape the fact that reconciliation is a morally loaded concept and different people bring their own ideological bias. An individual's understanding of reconciliation is generally informed by their basic beliefs about the world. Different ideologies of reconciliation can be identified (Hamber, 2002; Hamber and van der Merwe, 1998; van der Merwe, 1999), as noted above.

Thus we need to be aware that individuals will interpret differently the dimensions of reconciliation. Trying to reconcile different ideological positions—say, with regard to what attitudes need to change—is precisely what the reconciliation endeavour is about.

Moreover, although we delineate reconciliation from peacebuilding, in discussing the definition in various forums some confusion between the concepts has remained. This is partly because any strategy for peacebuilding will inevitably involve some focus on relationships, whether undertaking work that focuses on building institutions or a joint reconstruction project. So there is inevitably some overlap.

In part, too, the confusion is caused by the breadth of the way we approach reconciliation. Some have asked: if you say reconciliation involves, for example, substantial economic and political change, then are you not conflating peacebuilding processes (such as those targeted at social reconstruction) with your concept of reconciliation?

This confusion is resolved if one thinks about the strands we outline as *the issues that need to be addressed in any process of dealing with relationships following conflict*. Addressing damaged

relationships is the essence of reconciliation and our strands comprise the types of task that need to be undertaken.

There can be an added confusion because reconciliation seems to imply that there was some relationship in the first place (conciliation) that has broken down. In societies in conflict there is often no relationship in the first place. Thus, we use the concept of (re)building relationships, implying building non-existent relationships and rebuilding those that have broken down.

We frame our working definition from the perspective of thinking about addressing relationships in the broadest political sense; hence the claims that reconciliation needs a joint vision and political or economic change. These should be understood in the wider context of thinking about relationships at a social level.

Suppose, for the sake of simplicity, we present this as if there were only two individuals involved. To address a broken or perhaps even non-existent relationship between them:

- (1) they would have to share some common vision or understanding of the future—otherwise why bother to try to mend the relationship in the first place?—so this commonality as to why they wanted to have a relationship would have to be explored;
- (2) the hurts caused in the past would need to be acknowledged—this could include apology or at least recognition that actions undertaken by one or both parties had had an impact on the other, causing pain or suffering;
- (3) steps would need to be taken to (re)build



their relationship, such as dialogue or engaging in joint activities;

(4) work would need to be undertaken to address differences in attitude resulting from the conflict—this could include participants telling their version of events, attempts to reduce prejudice or dialogues to humanise ‘the other’; and

(5) if they were to have a relationship of any kind, there would need to be parity between them in social and economic terms, so measures would need to be taken to maximise this.

**R**econciliation, for us, is the *process* of addressing these five strands. It is not solely about the outcome of doing so (say, a mended relationship), because the social, interpersonal and political context is continually changing.

This is by definition complex and incomplete, and paradoxes and ambivalences will remain. For instance, having acknowledged one has hurt someone, it may be difficult ever to share with them a completely common view of the future, or to reconcile all attitudes. And for a range of reasons it may not be possible for individuals grappling with a broken-down relationship ever to be absolutely equal, socially or economically, causing continual ruptures and contradictions in the process of rebuilding. Reconciliation is thus by nature conflictual and dynamic. ”

# Conceiving reconciliation

**T**he first objective of the research was to address the question: how are a range of individuals from political parties and civil society conceptualising reconciliation in Northern Ireland? Our conversations with interviewees on this centred on three main sub-questions:

- What do you understand by the term ‘reconciliation’?
- What might a reconciled society look like?
- How can you relate the term ‘reconciliation’ to your own work?

From the data we drew a number of impressions:—

**In general, the interviewees were open to having a discussion on reconciliation.** Based on prior discussions with the project advisory group and others, and from a preliminary scour of the literature, we had formed an impression that reconciliation is often perceived in Northern Ireland with dismissiveness, even hostility, particularly because of its religious overtones. We were, therefore, hesitant about asking people to engage with the topic during

the interviews. Yet we found people were generally quite open to a discussion and were willing to explore how it related to them and their work.

**A significant number of interviewees found it difficult to engage in a meaningful way with the topic and were quite vague on the detail.** Some respondents appeared to have difficulty initially conceptualising reconciliation at all. Most had some idea of the outcome of reconciliation but were vague on the process. Some of the respondents’ explanations broadly addressed the idea of coming together and reaching some resolution of past events. Examples included:

I would take reconciliation in a very loose definition—one in which enemies become friends.

It’s about communities putting behind them some of the issues of division, recognising what has gone on in the past, and moving forward in an integrated way. This might not always be possible ...

It is the bringing together [of] groups that are

separate or apart. To build a relationship so they can communicate ... with a lot of hurt on both sides.

It is forgiveness ... coming together ... bridge-building.

... coming together of parties who have not been on good terms in the past ... for a better quality of life.

An agreement with people to put differences aside and form partnerships.

Some seemed to equate the notion of reconciliation with some sense of equality and changing the nature of relationships which have been unbalanced in the past:

Reconciliation is good honest common sense ... a good level playing field.

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*Metaphorically we are trying to  
step across boundaries. I would  
see that was an act of  
reconciliation.*

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From my perspective it's probably something more to do with dignity ... until people have a sense of dignity and cease to feel cornered ... they can't walk tall again ... There is a perception that the other side is just out to get it all, what they don't see is that it's just redressing the balance, and that they can gain from it.

Reconciliation is seen as a pathway to peace, even a prerequisite ... It's about accepting diversity and being comfortable with that.

Other respondents focused on the process of reconciliation to a far greater degree. It is worth quoting some of these statements at length as it gives a flavour of participants' understandings:

Reconciliation, to me, means that there has been a wrong done in the past and there is a grievance there which divides people. Reconciliation means an attempt to accept what has happened, to recognise a wrong, to work towards ensuring it does not happen again. It is not about dismissing all hurts, but about attempting to heal them and move forward.

In terms of a definition of reconciliation, it is reasonably clear in my own mind what it means ... I really see it as being in two parts involving the offended and offender ... Reconciliation, to me means ... in some ways it's a gift which the offended party gives to the perpetrator. In many ways it is an act of mercy. In many ways we are showing mercy because we know who they are. We know who these people are and where they live ... Metaphorically we are trying to step across boundaries. I would see that was an act of reconciliation. We have been empowered to do that. We have taken risks. We have crossed the divide, whatever that is ... For reconciliation to occur there needs to be some level of commitment from the offending person to the victim. This will form the basis of trust and confidence. They need to engage in definite, observable acts of confidence-building. It is not justifications for their actions which are needed. We need explanations ... For people to be reconciled, the offender must be thoroughly changed. There needs to be remorse. We need to get to where

there is healing.

Reconciliation is a process—trying to get people to recognise each other, accept each other, talk to each other, try to understand each other's ways of thinking, worries, concerns, to let them see that they're not the enemies they think they are, and then to go beyond toleration through more understanding towards a process where they actually can work with each other and realise that in some sense they depend on each other, that they can support each other, that they have common interests ... The mechanism is the important thing ... It's a very long journey and we're only starting.

It's difficult ... maybe it's just having eye contact with [a former enemy] ... eventually leading to a relationship on a human level ... rehumanising what you've demonised so that there's a mutual understanding and respect of the other human being, that doesn't have to extend to agreeing with what he's been involved in. Basically it's about treating each other as a human being would like to be treated.

Some, by contrast seemed to focus on the product of reconciliation:

A community which is at peace with itself, free from intimidation, sectarianism, political graffiti, slogans and flags. Respect for each other's traditions and working together.

Getting people of different opinions, religions and objectives to come together to look at their differences ... to agree to disagree but to work for consensus for everybody.

While the complexity of the phenomenon was evident in the responses given, most interviewees were fairly vague on the details of what

reconciliation might require or how to achieve it. Indeed, just as much of the literature does not provide firm direction, those we interviewed found it a challenging issue that required further reflection.

But key themes can be extracted from the above quotations, which do not depart far from the literature. Collating the responses, one could loosely infer that reconciliation was primarily about:

- addressing relationships between former enemies and those estranged due to conflict;
- engaging in confidence- and trust-building measures;
- rehumanising and getting to know the other;
- recognising that harm was done to another;
- showing remorse about this;
- providing explanations as to why it happened;
- finding ways to heal old wounds; and
- seeking means of accommodation, partnership, respect for difference and recognition of mutual dependence.

**Community-relations practitioners had a different understanding from councillors and council staff.** Councillors and council staff generally saw reconciliation as one of many issues faced in their daily work, but not a priority in the midst of helping people obtain their statutory rights. This suggested a legalistic, rather than a relationship-driven, understanding of dealing with past conflicts. It also suggested that they did not see attainment of rights as one of the components of reconciliation.

In voluntary organisations by contrast, reconciliation tended to be seen in terms of building and mending relationships. Some

representatives, indeed, saw it as a priority—even when their work was not explicitly labelled as such.

**No agreed definition of reconciliation exists at present.** As we had hypothesised, there was a distinct lack of clarity among interviewees as to what reconciliation meant—a potential difficulty some acknowledged. Most tended to view this as an obstacle to engaging people in cross-community processes or developing policies and practices to address the legacy of the conflict. It was also a contradiction—given that some interviewees were involved in work funded under the banner of reconciliation. This did not mean that some did not have their own understanding, but a shared understanding was definitely not evident.

The practical problems arising from this were summed up by one respondent thus:

Reconciliation may sound like something which is too ambitious. But also, it has been bandied about a bit and I don't like that. I don't like the way it is being used. People actually don't have any idea what reconciliation is. When you are dealing with people who are not from an academic side, I think it is a difficult thing for people to digest.

**Few people could articulate a vision of what a reconciled society would look like.**

When we posed this challenging question to our interviewees, we met responses like 'I don't know', 'I have never seen one' or 'Show me one!' One voluntary-sector employee felt that, whatever a reconciled society looked like, it 'would be very boring!'

Some did volunteer such a vision, however. Typical responses included:

One where there is less institutional separation. Where people live, play, work, go to school together. There would be more understanding of other people's points of view. The nature of religion would become more irrelevant.

A reconciled society is one where the people are at ease with each other.

I guess a reconciled society is a more peaceful and less divided one. We should think about it as a peaceful society in which people are not afraid to speak out. I think that people hold on to their traditions because they think that that is their power ... I think it should be about choice.

It is one in which people can celebrate each other's identity as well as their own.

I think it would be somewhere where people would be quite comfortable in themselves, and while having reservations about the other being strong ... and confident enough to not see the other as a threat.

... One in which people can live at peace with their neighbour, without fear or threat of attack.

One respondent seemed to look backwards, perhaps nostalgically, or some might say romantically:

It would be going back 35 years, and where, if you went down the line of a working-class community in those days there wasn't a difference, especially in a rural area. Where you would have farmers work together, and if it were the 12th of July, the Catholic neighbours helped the Protestant neighbours. And when it came to the 15th of August it was reversed. I do quite well remember that. You went to your own place of worship, and everyone was respected. There was no difference made.

Clearly, several respondents were none too sanguine about the potential of achieving the type of society they saw as reconciled. One noted:

We won't get a full-blown reconciled society any time soon. It will be much further down the line. The ultimate aim would be a fully inclusive society. To accept that that will happen five years after an agreement is cloud-cuckoo-land stuff.

Interestingly, in conclusion, it is worth noting that one respondent felt that his community and Northern Ireland were generally 'pretty much reconciled'. On one level one could say he argued for a very loose form of coexistence; on another he seemed to minimise any real tensions:

I still believe it is only the crumbs that people are dealing with and blowing out of proportion. I don't think that people living separate lives is a bad thing.

Another respondent also spoke of Northern Ireland as being reconciled in different ways:

You almost think that a reconciled society would look like a nice English village with everyone cutting their roses and being civil to each other ... But when you actually go and stay in a nice English village and hear the backbiting and the arguments over hedge heights and all sorts of pettiness ... In some ways Northern Ireland is a more reconciled society because we face the issues and we are not as socially divided. At weddings and funerals the cross section of class always strikes me.

Thus, the question about what a reconciled society would look like evoked a range of responses. Several interviewees seemed to hold

the view that a reconciled society would be more tolerant, with less social separation and a greater social ease and freedom from fear. But most were fairly pessimistic about achieving this in the short term.

**Few people used the term reconciliation to describe their activities.**

While we found little hesitancy towards discussing reconciliation, interviewees appeared to have difficulty relating it to what they did. We asked each respondent to describe their work, what they understood it as seeking to achieve and, given a choice, what they would call it. Reconciliation was not a term that they used, or felt particularly comfortable in using, to describe what they did. Yet, when pressed on the detail, they could identify aspects of what we would describe as reconciliation and several noted that they engaged in work to foster conciliatory behaviour.

Of those directly engaged in self-described peacebuilding, most appeared more comfortable with 'community relations', 'good relations' or 'community cohesion'. No interviewee advocated replacing these with reconciliation, although many seemed comfortable interchanging them. But many were not clear about what these terms meant either, or how they differed. Some felt 'reconciliation' had the potential to 'frighten off' those they wished to engage. As one respondent put it, they might be perceived as attempting to impose something 'heavy' on them.

Concepts such as 'good relations' were seen as easier to introduce and it appeared the interviewees had genuine concerns about pushing the boundaries too far. Some felt council

members might see ‘reconciliation’ as idealistic or utopian, or as demanding a coming together for which they were not ready. We can only infer that reconciliation must imply a much deeper process for most respondents than these other terms.

One CRO, hesitant about using the term ‘reconciliation’—particularly with those whom she would be encouraging to do cross-community work for the first time—was by no means dismissive, but cautious:

It is certainly relevant, but it is not one which I would use an awful lot. I would use the term peacebuilding as a field of work. I would prefer that, and feel more comfortable with it. I think that reconciliation is more of a mindset thing, and it is more difficult for people to understand. There are problems with it. You would have to break it down for people you work with ... I go through different cycles when I am thinking about terminology. I am not sure that good relations officer wouldn’t be better ... While community relations, in terms of terminology, is very hard to define, I think it is okay. It gives you a bit of an umbrella that other things can fall under.

Another respondent, involved in facilitating dialogue across communities and sectors, was also more comfortable describing their work as ‘peacebuilding’:

I like the term peacebuilding as it implies the creation of understanding between people coming from different backgrounds, traditions and cultures. If other things come out of it, like trust and integrity, then that is great. I am not too concerned about what word is being used because all words mean different things to different people. It is about creating a space in which people can let

go of the layers and go beyond the artificial boundaries that have been created. It is about developing confidence.

**Views of reconciliation were influenced by ideological position.** We did a loose textual analysis of responses to the questions probing views on reconciliation (see appendix D). Perhaps not surprisingly, this generated many associated words and phrases. The most common were:

‘relationships’,  
‘trust’,  
‘at peace with itself’,  
‘healing’,  
‘respect’, and  
‘moving forward’.

Some of the themes echo those extracted from the definitions of reconciliation respondents supplied: relationships are core to people’s understanding of reconciliation, building trust is a critical first step and a mainstay, and hurts must be addressed through healing processes. Mention of ‘moving forward’ and ‘respect’ also suggests some overlap with the idea of reconciliation being backward- and forward-looking, and that somewhere tolerance and respect is critical to the outcome.

**References to theology were quite common in discussion.** Some interviewees, mostly clergy and unionist politicians, made theological references when discussing reconciliation. For them reconciliation should be viewed through a biblical lens. One councillor said:

Reconciliation in its truest sense is when an individual realises he is a sinner before God ... he can do nothing for himself regarding his sin and

needs to rely on the eternal and unchangeable being of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we're not reconciled to God we cannot be reconciled to others.

A voluntary-sector employee reflected:

If we understand the definition from the Judeo-Christian perspective, reconciliation is to be 'at-one-ment'. The state of being at one with others. If that's what reconciliation is, that ought to be the ultimate goal.

For other interviewees, however, 'reconciliation' stimulated a negative or cynical reaction, dismissed as being theological and therefore not relevant. Across the board, though, there was little reference to 'forgiveness', often highlighted as an important element in theological literature. It did not feature highly as a prerequisite of reconciliation, even for those from a religious background.

If forgiveness was mentioned, it was viewed as very personal and not something which could be forced. One interviewee, working with a victims' group, said: 'I would not focus on the issue of forgiveness, as it is a very personal matter—and it certainly not something which I have been able to achieve. Forgiveness in the head is easy—but not in the heart.'

A councillor also felt forgiveness and reconciliation should not be linked. He reflected:

When people talk about forgiveness what they are really saying is that they don't want it to be a bad memory. They want to parcel it up and put it away. I don't think that they really are truly forgiving anyone.

Our respondents' views seemed closer to the

perspective (Huyse, 2003) that reconciliation is not primarily about forgiveness or absolute harmony—even though most of the literature on reconciliation in Northern Ireland began from a religious perspective. For reconciliation as a concept to take root more widely, it would appear to need to acquire a broader connotation.

**Few people made reference to themselves in terms of reconciliation.** Most interviewees spoke about reconciliation in the abstract and volunteered no changes required of themselves. One respondent however reflected:

My work is calling me to try and reconcile myself to the world, to reconcile myself to me, to God. I'm also called in some sense to lead others to do this. But the process of leading is so, so difficult, and I'm not sure how to do that.

Most respondents did not appear particularly reflexive in this regard—or they chose not to share any such reflections with the interviewers. This suggested that reconciliation was, in the view of some at least, a task for 'the others'. Perhaps, however, some respondents' initiation of, or participation in, cross-community activities evidenced their commitment to reconciliation and, therefore, they did not feel the need to talk about it in a personal sense.

**Many viewed the term reconciliation as being 'imported' from other contexts.** While we had hypothesised that some interviewees would see reconciliation as being adopted from South Africa, particularly its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the EU was much more of a reference point. It was clear that EU peace-



and-reconciliation funding had heavily influenced perceptions. Reconciliation tended to be viewed through the prism of the programme—despite few being clear as to what a European definition of reconciliation might be either.

A significant portion of those interviewed from the voluntary sector had received funding from the programme and were very aware of the need to show a reconciliation outcome. But most felt that the EU funding bodies provided little direction in this regard. One respondent, when asked ‘what is reconciliation?’, said: ‘It’s what you have to put down on a form to get the money. It is funder-speak and it doesn’t mean much to people.’

Elected representatives, in particular, very quickly referred to the PEACE programme, indicating how they viewed the EU as the main driver of a reconciliation agenda. Some were, or had been, members of local strategy partnerships or the predecessor district partnerships, which might have informed their responses. Only one councillor, a member of an LSP, dismissed the notion of reconciliation, which he asserted had been inappropriately imposed by the EU and was unsuitable for Northern Ireland at present. He insisted the role of the LSP was to support economic and social development, not building relationships *per se*, which he saw as the agenda of reconciliation.

One community development co-ordinator, whose organisation received substantial PEACE II funding, spoke of these ‘hurdles’ to securing assistance. His organisation ran an information-technology programme in rural areas and to fulfil the reconciliation requirements it had to conduct ‘peace and reconciliation facilitated

workshops with the community groups’. He said: ‘For the PEACE II applications, the reconciliation bit really was a bit of an “add-on”. There definitely does seem to be a certain level of artificialness [*sic*] about the way in which you have to present the project so that it fits the reconciliation criteria.’

Wherever the term originated, most respondents clearly did not feel any *special* relevance to Northern Ireland nor any *particular* localised ownership of it. Clearly the concept was closely tied to the PEACE programme, although most respondents felt this gave little direction on its use, leading to the ‘add-on’ description. Despite the millions already spent, much work remains in developing an integrated understanding of reconciliation.

**Reconciliation is viewed as a ‘two communities’ issue, to the exclusion of other communities, including ethnic minorities.** Few respondents made reference to reconciliation as anything other than a ‘two traditions’ (Catholic and Protestant) concern. Interviewees from ethnic-minority support groups, however, felt that while they were not directly the target of hostilities associated with the Northern Ireland conflict they had a role to play in reconciliation. And they would value being included and involved in such activities, particularly given the growth in migrants to the region in recent years.

Despite some of the wider definitions mentioned by some respondents, reconciliation is thus still largely seen as a concept focusing narrowly on relationships, suggesting a close affinity to the concept of community relations in its most limited sense. ”

# Responses to definition

**H**aving engaged each interviewee in a general discussion on reconciliation, we then presented—so as not to overwhelm them with detail—a short version of our working definition (opposite). We did so with some apprehension, having no way of knowing how they would react or if they would constructively engage with it. Reaction to the definition was, however, overwhelmingly positive and brought the discussion to a different level.

Several respondents were surprised by its complexity, admitting they had not thought the concept through in such detail. The impression we formed was that interviewees had seen reconciliation as very abstract and were pleasantly surprised to see it broken down into possible steps or components. One councillor reflected: ‘It deals much more widely with it than I would have done.’ But some also suggested that the definition was only helpful as a ‘lens’ through which to consider reconciliation.

Some interviewees questioned whether there were earlier steps to take, before being in a position to tackle the issues proposed. One saw

## RECONCILIATION

**Our working hypothesis is that reconciliation is a necessary process following conflict. However, we believe it is a voluntary act and cannot be imposed.**

**It involves five interwoven and related strands:**

**Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society**

**Acknowledging and dealing with the past**

**Building positive relationships**

**Significant cultural and attitudinal change**

**Substantial social, economic and political change**

dealing with anger as a prerequisite: ‘I think there’s a lot of anger that needs to be dealt with before we can move on.’ Another felt confidence-building work was necessary before any other element could be seriously addressed.

Another again felt there was work to do in getting people simply to recognise that reconciliation was important—and that they needed, and had a responsibility, to be involved. This respondent noted:

The definition starts too far down the road: why would anyone want to address the past if they feel their community provides everything they need? ... The pyramid of sectarianism shows us that we're all involved. But how do you convince me that I'm involved, that I need to be part of this? So there's an earlier stage of helping people to see this as a need ... this is a responsibility.

These points link with the earlier expressions by some respondents of fear of introducing the concept to those with whom they worked, in case they were not ready for it. This also fits with the idea that reconciliation is still largely seen as a Catholic-Protestant issue, implicating those directly affected by or involved in violence. A more holistic understanding of the need to address relationships across society—including areas that have remained largely unaffected—and between citizens and the state is not very evident.

**W**e were interested in what interviewees felt were the crucial aspects of the definition, as well as any they felt controversial, unnecessary or overemphasised. We were also interested in which elements they would prioritise and how they would be ranked. Needless to say, respondents differed.

Some suggested all features were of equal importance and interlinked—that they would

have to happen at the same time and be given equal emphasis. Others found it difficult to state a preference and felt it would depend on the individual or community concerned and their particular experiences of the conflict. A typical response here was:

I agree with the five main areas, but it depends on where you are looking at this from and who you are. How you have been affected by the conflict will depend on the way you answer this. If you are from a victims' group you may be most interested in the justice aspects ... The definition will have different resonances depending on who is looking at it.

But most respondents expressed opinions as to which aspects they would prioritise, and the order in which these steps could logically be taken.

Few spent any time commenting upon or contradicting the assertion about a shared vision. One who did picked up on the issue of interdependence:

I do see being interdependent as being important ... but at times I wonder if we are as interdependent as the people in South Africa, for instance. The stories I hear suggest that the two communities managed reasonably well not depending on each other. But my own view is that we are interdependent. At the level of ideas and spirituality and culture we can gain from each other. I find it boring at times when I stick with just my own people ... it's more exciting with others.

Another interviewee was more pessimistic about the possibility of a common view of the future. He reflected:

Five years ago I thought it was possible but now

I don't because of different interpretations of the Belfast agreement. I thought it was a settlement, but other parties thought it was a process toward a united Ireland and have sent horrendous messages to my community to show it. A shared vision has been completely undermined by Sinn Féin and the IRA.

There was some divergence among the case studies. Several respondents in Ballymena felt there should be a major emphasis on developing a shared vision, yet this did not feature highly in Omagh or Armagh. One possible explanation is that Armagh and Omagh appear to be more mixed communities and there may be a greater sense of commonality—but this is speculative.

Acknowledging and dealing with the past was, by a large margin, the aspect given most emphasis by respondents on the whole. We had thought many would read this element as being specifically about a truth commission, something many in Northern Ireland currently oppose. But we found that dealing with the past was not only viewed as requiring particular consideration, but according to many had to be the first step in any reconciliation process.

This was the case for councillors from all political parties and most of those working in the voluntary sector. One interviewee, from a victims' group, emphasised that this was the most important issue for his members, though he suggested the word 'effectively' be added to the statement.

Few of our interviewees, however, specified what 'dealing with the past' would involve and they were vague on the detail. Some made reference to judicial inquiries, while others

referred to simple acknowledgment and storytelling. One voluntary-sector worker noted:

Acknowledging and dealing with the past I see at an early stage as necessary. But I don't put big play on that being a big process. I think it's something like just storytelling ... acknowledging what happened. I don't think it is a very workable or practical approach to get too much involved in trying to explain the past or get individuals who may have been involved in wrongdoing to admit what they did ... Even it were achievable I don't think it would be too helpful in helping people to move on.

Surprisingly, given the focus on dealing with the past, there was little emphasis on the idea of a truth commission. Few interviewees referred to it as a specific 'tool'. One said:

I wouldn't be a big fan of the truth commission idea, because I think it tends to be divisive rather than conciliatory. It may work for some people, but not for all. It is not the panacea for reconciliation. It may copper-fasten some already divided views ... We need to be taking forward reconciliation at all levels, including grassroots projects ... I wouldn't be against a truth commission *per se*, but would only support it in the context of reconciliation generally. We shouldn't put all the eggs in one basket.

Another councillor said: 'There is no point in resurrecting things. It won't help at all. I don't believe in the idea of a truth commission. Things should just be left to decay naturally. We should let sleeping dogs lie.'

While most respondents definitely saw a value in dealing with the past, they did not know how to deal with it effectively. Some seemed to fear anything too structured or

challenging. But there was an implied view that reconciliation had to go deeper than dealing with current relationships and to address the past.

Most respondents made some reference to building positive relationships as being an important aspect, but this was the focus of little discussion. Perhaps they felt it self-evident. Notably, this aspect of the definition was given most attention by the Ballymena interviewees, with some prioritising it above all others. This might suggest that in this area groups and councillors are still at the initial stages of building relationships and reaching out.

The responses on attitudinal change were particularly interesting, as they reflected an understanding of the term which differed from our intent. While some interviewees agreed that significant cultural and attitudinal change was important in a process of reconciliation, others were uncertain about its implications.

We were envisaging that changes were required in how people related to, and their attitudes towards, one another—that reconciliation required breaking down cultures of suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence, and building a culture of human rights, tolerance and mutual respect. But some interviewees perceived the statement as implying that people would have to change their own ‘cultural traditions’ for reconciliation to take place.

This appeared particularly true of those from a Protestant background, who asserted that culture was intrinsic to communities and not something which should be changed. A community development worker with rural Protestant groups noted: ‘Protestant people

have a real fear of losing their identity and want no part in changes in their culture. They will not take part in any reconciliation initiatives which aim to make them lose part of their own identity.’

A unionist councillor also questioned the need for such change: ‘I don’t agree that we need significant cultural and attitudinal change. It is very important that people hold on to their cultures as they are very important for people.’ Another interviewee commented:

People might find significant change threatening ... they might think it’s getting rid of their culture. If it could be stated as ‘cultural respect’ and could relate to an attitudinal change regarding difference then I would regard it as positive.

Most respondents referred to cultural and attitudinal change as being, necessarily, a slow process. Only one gave it precedence as a starting point for reconciliation.

On socio-economic and political change, the vast majority of respondents felt that this already enjoyed a disproportionate emphasis, to the detriment of relationship-building and addressing the legacy of the past. One victims’ group worker said: ‘I would say that, at present, “acknowledging and dealing with the past” and “building positive relationships” are being overlooked and that there is a focus on this idea of “substantial social, economic and political change”.’

Another did not see the value, noting:

Substantial social and economic change—I wouldn’t see that as essential. I don’t immediately see why there is a need for economic change for reconciliation to take place. People’s lives

shouldn't depend on what politicians do, but politicians do need to be involved in reconciliation. They need to see that their political opponents' aspirations need to be considered.

But, there were some dissenters, both from the voluntary sector and from councillors. After dealing with the past, one councillor placed high priority on social and economic change:

On substantial political change, I think it is happening in Northern Ireland. I do believe that social and economic change needs to have more focus on it. A lot of PEACE I funding was not sustainable because it didn't have the economic basis. There needs to be new thinking about how to support social and economic regeneration. The PEACE money has been very useful and positive things have come out of it on the ground. But we need to build a real social economy which is sustainable. I am not sure that everyone would agree but I do believe that jobs and reconciliation do dovetail in together and it is a way of going forward ... I would put the economic change high up in reconciliation initiatives.

Another interviewee from the voluntary sector felt that this pillar had to be prioritised.

I would prioritise political, social and economic change. I think that if that happened then we can start to build positive relationships. I don't think reconciliation is really quite understood ... I think everyone has their own interpretation of reconciliation.

These comments reflect wider debates about the PEACE II programme: did it overemphasise economic reconstruction at the expense of dealing with relationships and attitudes between communities? On the whole, most interviewees

seemed to support this view.

In South Africa, by contrast, the reconciliation agenda has been criticised for overly focusing on relationships and ignoring the socio-economic context (Hamber, 2002; van der Merwe, 1999). It appears the opposite is true in Northern Ireland. This suggests different emphases in priorities between the societies. It also perhaps reinforces the finding that reconciliation is understood largely through the prism of the EU and the term has become synonymous with the PEACE programme, which under PEACE II had a strong socio-economic focus. Interestingly, in 2000, when proposals with a heavy economic emphasis were being submitted by the devolved government to Brussels in preparation for PEACE II, a DD paper highlighted the missing 'R-word'.<sup>1</sup> ”

<sup>1</sup> available at [www.democraticdialogue.org/unsound\\_000.htm](http://www.democraticdialogue.org/unsound_000.htm)

# Roles and responsibilities

**H**aving established that there was no agreed definition of reconciliation, although some acceptance of our component-driven approach, we were interested in exploring how people viewed themselves in relation to the term—and how they perceived the role they could play and the responsibilities of the various actors.

Our conversations with interviewees in this section centred on three sub-questions:

- How are relations between various sectors at local level?
- How easy/difficult is it to implement reconciliation initiatives at local levels?
- Whose responsibility is it to initiate and support reconciliation processes at local level?

From the data we made the following observations:—

**Relationships within and between sectors have a significant impact on reconciliation at local level.** We were interested in exploring the relationships between sectors within the localities and the impact those relationships—or their absence—had on reconciliation

initiatives. While individual relationships were often described in encouraging terms, tensions were clearly apparent, particularly between voluntary bodies and local authorities.

In all three cases, a common thread of negativity appeared in discussions with voluntary-sector interviewees in relation to the respective councils. The latter tended to be viewed as little more than a potential funding avenue, rather than major players in reconciliation. One council staff member was philosophical on the subject: ‘Relations between council and voluntary sector have improved. Some see me as a friend and some see me as an enemy, due to the decisions we’ve taken, usually to do with funding.’

A voluntary-sector employee in another area reflected:

I gave up on the council a long time ago ... I don’t foresee much assistance from them. We use council facilities for events, we pay the going rate, but I haven’t explored much how it could be otherwise. I’m not optimistic ... There is not a very constructive relationship between the voluntary sector and [the] council.

Another interviewee felt that the work of their group was ‘more tolerated than embraced’ by council members, while another again said: ‘I know from the invitations we get from the council that we are perceived as a resource that does assist at some nominal level, doing work that otherwise they might have to do themselves ... but that’s as far as it goes.’

Quite a number of councillors readily admitted that their relationships with the voluntary sector were not as good as they could be. One commented: ‘My sense is that the voluntary sector feels the council should be doing more ... but they are prepared to give us a chance at it.’

Interestingly, the councils in all three areas appeared to have a particularly good relationship with the churches and a longstanding history of engagement with them, including the establishment of inter-faith fora and the organisation of ecumenical events.

But some clergy interviewed admitted that their relationship with the council was not always straightforward. One local church leader reflected:

The council is supportive of what we are doing in bringing the churches together. But given the nature of the council’s role the churches become a problem for them. The agenda of a church group is not necessarily that of a community-relations organisation. We have belief systems and one of our roles is to promote our faith dimension in the community. That is not always the agenda of a council.

Interviewees were quick to highlight that relationships within the voluntary sector are not necessarily as supportive or collegiate as one

would imagine. One interviewee said:

There are tensions at times. Sometimes community groups do not pull together. There seems to be a focus on personalities and community groups often don’t represent the community. The majority of the community are not involved—there is apathy, perceptions of cliques, own agendas being played out.

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*Some see me as a friend and some see me as an enemy, due to the decisions we’ve taken, usually to do with funding.*

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Councillors observing relationships within the voluntary sector were surprisingly opinionated on the subject. One described them as ‘tense’ and ‘petty and personal’. Another viewed community groups as ‘separately ploughing their own furrow ... It is difficult to get them to act in a united way’—thus confirming that relationships between councils and voluntary groups are not the most constructive for jointly pursuing reconciliation initiatives. This view of lack of co-operation and joint initiative seemed, however, to be less evident among council staff.

**Voluntary-sector employees made a clear distinction between their relationships with council staff and council members.** In all



three cases, the CROs had been in post for some time, unlike in some district councils. While this was coincidental in one sense, it is perhaps not surprising that a desire to explore areas where significant reconciliation work was being undertaken should lead to these three areas being chosen. Most voluntary-sector interviewees were positive about the support offered by council officials, if not necessarily by the council itself.

One interviewee said: 'Council is striving to be involved and to help ... but there is a clear distinction between council departments and the councillors.' Another reflected:

The council won't take the initiative ... maybe I need to take responsibility, to talk about these things in an open and frank way ... Maybe the problem just needs to be stated more clearly ... Maybe I'm not aware of any difficulty that the council officers have with higher management.

Another interviewee again, while expressing cynicism about councillors' interest in the voluntary sector, similarly distinguished council members and staff:

I would find that councillors come along looking for support when they need a vote and tend to leave you with empty promises. In our dealing with council, it would mostly be with council officials and not with the officers themselves.

It was obvious from our discussions that council officials are often limited by the decisions made by elected representatives, constraining the type and depth of work they would ideally wish to undertake. Our research suggests that CROs have developed creative approaches to dealing with bureaucratic council processes and the vagaries of councillors' decision-making,

while maintaining their integrity with the community in the broader sense.

**Relations between councillors are poor, detrimentally affecting local reconciliation initiatives.** Some interviewees felt that the strained relationships and public disagreements between councillors had a negative impact on community relations. One voluntary-sector worker said: 'They should be aware that they are part of the problem ... representatives need to be very careful in what they do and say, as things are easily taken up the wrong way.'

Another suggested: 'Some politicians are as guilty as the perpetrators for inciting communities ... Elected representatives need to take more stock.'

Tensions within the council chamber are not confined to the traditional sectarian divide: relationships between nationalist/republican parties and within the different strands of unionism were also highlighted. The chair of a cross-community project reflected frustration and anger in his dealings with the council. He spoke of the 'parish-pump politics' that pervades local politics and 'slows things down'. Certain councillors appeared willing to lend support to projects privately, but would not do so publicly for fear of jeopardising votes within their own catchment areas. He concluded:

We would do better if there was less government and less politics. If there was less I think we would get more done. Councillors appeal to the lowest common denominator.

In contrast to these views, councillors tended to play down divisions. When asked to reflect on

relationships with other elected representatives, a long-serving councillor said they were 'very good at one level':

Everyone's talking, more so than they would have ... We are not at each other's throats. There is a recognition of very different perspectives.

Another councillor, referring to relationships within the council chamber, commented: 'We battle it out, but there is a meeting of minds on social and economic issues ... We have good working relationships and help each other out on areas of mutual interest.'

Yet another painted relationships with council colleagues in a positive light:

I have good relationships with everyone here ... I never held spite. I never stopped talking to anybody and if anybody stopped talking to me I kept talking to them until they got fed up and they forgot the differences they had.

Clearly, therefore, there is a disjunction between the view of councillors and community groups. The latter seem to feel strongly that the politics of councils hampers and undermines reconciliation initiatives.

Some interviewees did however suggest that local media tended to sensationalise or overemphasise any tensions in the council chamber, and this did not accurately reflect day-to-day relationships within the council. One respondent felt that on 90 per cent of bread-and-butter issues councillors agreed unanimously, but the other ten per cent provided the media interest.

**There is no consensus on who should take responsibility for implementing or**

### **supporting reconciliation at local level.**

When this challenge was posed, most interviewees responded that everyone should assume responsibility. But respondents rarely followed this up with an example of what they were personally contributing to reconciliation.

There was a diversity of views on whether further responsibility for reconciliation should be devolved to councils. Perhaps not surprisingly, council staff, LSP managers and councillors were generally enthusiastic about the possibility of more responsibility, with local authorities taking the lead. Reasons given included:

Because councils are the local body for delivering services and giving people a voice.

It could be effectively done through council ... building up relationships that exist for purely practical reasons.

Because I don't think that power at a regional level can be brought to bear effectively in the district if it's that remote.

If you think in terms of governance, the council is the closest point of contact with the people. It is the councillors and council staff who know what is happening on the ground.

A chief executive of one authority argued that, given extra responsibility, councils might 'step up to the plate', noting:

I do feel that the council should be given more responsibility for community relations. At the moment the level of leadership in the council is very low. By giving the council more responsibility the level of governance would be raised upwards.

Another interviewee, arguing the case for local responsibility, said:

This local work is very important as it can act as a bulwark to the higher-level difficulties. People will recognise that they do not want to go back to the way things were before. That is the value of local work.

But many interviewees were reluctant to support devolution of further power for reconciliation to councils and were cautious of added responsibility being transferred without adequate planning. One councillor said: 'The thing about community-relations programmes is that councillors feel that they haven't much control over them. If we were to take on extra responsibilities, it would need to be very well thought out.'

A member of the faith community reflected:

It's hard to know about further devolution because councils are so volatile. It could be good one year and bad the next. It would be a great shame if you had councils working for reconciliation but fighting amongst themselves.

A voluntary-sector worker said:

It would scare me because of bad experiences ... It would need to be accountable ... It's coming from politicians who are seeking to break the back of community. Local power is better, but there's a lot of work to be done in educating councils in how to use their power. Councillors should be prepared to build relationships with community.

Not all were enthusiastic about the possibility

of local councils being given extra responsibilities. Within the voluntary sector respondents were generally hesitant, particularly if further funding streams were to be administered by the council. One expressed a fear of funding proposals 'falling foul of bias on either side, depending on the make-up of the council'.

The interview data suggested a clear picture of reconciliation being 'politicised' by councils and used as a political football: one party would grasp an issue, which would deter others from addressing it as it became partisan. This form of political bias appeared prevalent in councils.

Under existing council structures, CROs are located within departments as diverse as leisure, recreation or tourism, community services, equality or policy development. This may have limited their ability to share experiences and build partnerships with counterparts elsewhere.

Our research underlines a long-held criticism that community relations are not taken seriously by elected representatives or other council officials, and that CROs often feel sidelined or isolated with their work viewed as low-priority. While most councillors interviewed did value support for reconciliatory activities and were supportive of their CRO as an employee, some were dismissive of the work and suspicious of the central-government agenda they perceived as being behind the community relations programme.

But experiences differed across the three case-study areas. And it was clear CROs had developed tactics and styles which allowed them to deal with potentially controversial or emotive issues, within the constraints of a politically charged environment. »

# Conclusions

It is not only the specifics of how we define reconciliation that matter, but how we explain the concept and use it. We have outlined our model for thinking about reconciliation in societies in conflict or coming out of conflict.

We feel, as did most respondents whose views informed this research, that all the strands of reconciliation we identify need to be addressed. Each component, however, may entail different mechanisms, timeframes and approaches, operating in tandem and in a complementary way. There is no quick-fix solution to sustainable reconciliation.

Reconciliation is after all the *process* of addressing these different strands, along with the paradoxes they present (Lederach, 1997). This is, by definition, a long-term and complex endeavour.

Even if an agreed definition is difficult to achieve in a divided society, there is an onus on all of us to explain what we mean by terms such as reconciliation. It is only through robust dialogue that we can ensure a more reflexive peacebuilding. This is vital, because our

research on the working definition revealed a lack of strategic thinking in statutory bodies, funding agencies and the voluntary sector with regard to the concept of reconciliation.

Each of the respondents we interviewed, particularly those from the voluntary sector, had a clear understanding of how to address the conflict more broadly. And most felt they knew something about reconciliation, viewing it as a legitimate aspiration. But the fact that most also appeared to value the opportunity to think about what reconciliation really meant suggested not too much such reflection had taken place.

Few had a clearly defined understanding of reconciliation, which is not surprising given the lack of clarity coming from government, policy-making bodies and some funders. As such, our research confirms the assertion by Porter (2003: 25) that 'it is probably true to say that a majority of Northern citizens declare themselves in favour of reconciliation. The problem is that what is understood by it is often too vague or too weakly held to withstand the assaults of its detractors.'

This lack of conceptual clarity is not confined to those we interviewed but is symptomatic of the field. A practical (yet flexible) definition has not hitherto been shared among the practitioners and funders of peacebuilding.

The purpose of this research was not to come up with a final definition of reconciliation, but to explore how people were themselves working with the term and its resonances for them. Our research suggests that although some see it as a term 'imported' from the EU context, they are positive about the concept and see it as relevant, if it can be more clearly defined.

Developing a conceptual approach to reconciliation that informs practice, and *vice versa*, should not be restricted by any programme or model (ours included). We hope our working definition contributes to framing, but more importantly promoting, further debate on the meaning of reconciliation.

Certainly those with whom we discussed it seemed to feel it provided a valuable framework for deepening and widening the Northern Ireland debate. But this is not enough. In the years to come, workshops, public debates and consultations on the use, and abuse, of the concept of reconciliation should be rolled out by government departments and funders.

Dealing with the past was identified by many respondents as the next major component of the reconciliation agenda. Much work remains to unpack what this really means.

In some areas, however, where little peacebuilding work has been done, the process of building relationships still needs to be undertaken. In these areas, our research suggests, it

would be a mistake to jump prematurely into the debate on dealing with the past. As such, we need to recognise geographical differences in how to approach reconciliation in different localities, depending on their experience of violence and their demography.

On the whole, we still found a nervousness about promoting reconciliation, and the process is not adequately understood or supported in the political arena. We found, at the community level, that local politicians were blamed at times for continuing to play sectarian and polarising politics, undermining attempts to build relationships, change attitudes or assist in finding a common vision. Ways need to be found to stop rewarding segregation, both politically and geographically. Some respondents also noted that the media were particularly unconstructive, focusing as they did on areas of disagreement rather than commonalities.

In the final instance, however, we were encouraged by some of our findings. Reconciliation is a concept to which individuals are attracted and interested in operationalising, although few use the term to describe their work. The weaknesses, however, lie in how it is being defined and whether the broader political environment exists to make such a definition a reality. Work remains to be done if the concept is going to become a practical, relevant and locally-owned component of the peacebuilding agenda.

**A** central aim of this research, besides seeking clarity on the concept of reconciliation, was to consider its meaning and practical use within localities. We found

the term was not used a great deal in these *milieux*. Practitioners preferred to use ‘community relations’, ‘good relations’ or ‘community cohesion’.

This reflects the limited focus on defining or even debating the concept. There are thus a range of assumed meanings attached. For example, because the term was first written about in Northern Ireland (and elsewhere) from a religious perspective, it has acquired strong theological connotations. Whether correct or not, there seems to be a view that a more religious usage suggests that reconciliation comes cheaply—that it might be associated with forced forgiveness, or imply forgiveness without truth or justice first prevailing.

As we noted *vis-à-vis* the literature, this is not necessarily the perspective of those writing from a religious perspective. Once again, it reinforces the need for wider public debate on the term and for some clarity to be secured.

In an almost contradictory way, reconciliation is also seen as a deep and sometimes threatening process. Respondents chose not to use the term in their daily work at times because they feared it would scare people off. In some cases this might have been associated with the perceived religious overtones, but in others it was because reconciliation was understood as somewhere ‘coming together’ and thus some process of social and political transformation.

As such, respondents (except for a few) seemed instinctually to have an understanding of reconciliation that was deeper than limited coexistence. In fact, some would argue that coexistence has been the dominant model for the majority of those in Northern Ireland

(mainly among the middle class) not directly affected by the conflict, and this has led to a ‘separate development’ which has perpetuated division. Something more is needed.

Overall, there seems to be an anxiety in Northern Ireland that genuine reconciliation will mean compromise, or at least the rehumanisation of old enemies. Of course, this is what it does mean, so why the anxiety? The obvious answer is that giving up the familiar parameters of how one understands the ‘other’ implies a threat to one’s long-held identity, as well as conceptualisations of the conflict as a clear, black-and-white contest between ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. Reconciliation implies a muddying of these waters.

Our research suggests some readiness—for example, in the cautious support for exploring how to deal with the past—to engage in breaking down myopic understandings of the determinants of the conflict. But the reaction to the term also suggests much remains to be done to create the conditions conducive to a deeper reconciliation.

We also found that community groups are further down the line in thinking about reconciliation than district councillors. The voluntary sector is more philosophically and practically involved with reconciliation. Councillors are largely not engaging with the topic and at times we struggled to secure their interest. Most seemed to be locked into divided local politics, which our voluntary-group respondents saw as undermining reconciliation efforts.

Even a limited understanding of the importance of a common vision—in particular, the acceptance of interdependence—is a long way

off in some areas. Modest co-operation on economic issues is not replicated in the socio-political arena. One way to address this is a macro-governmental strategy on reconciliation that councils are obliged to implement.

This is the thinking, in part, behind *A Shared Future*. Yet this too could play into the soft-option approach to reconciliation through the use of sanitised terms like 'good relations'.

Our research suggests that a robust approach is needed. Reconciliation, as a difficult and complex process, needs to be championed at the highest level; the challenges it presents need to be confronted, not avoided.

The responsibility of district councils in promoting reconciliation was an issue raised by our respondents. On one level, many favoured greater devolution of power to support reconciliation in localities. This seemed to make practical sense. But serious doubts were expressed as to the ability of local politicians to forward a reconciliation agenda in a non-sectarian and effective manner.

In addition, some areas demonstrated poor 'community infrastructure', which affects the quality and quantity of community-relations work. It appears that additional community development may be necessary, particularly within rural Protestant communities, before real cross-community engagement can occur.

Reconciliation is hampered by the communalist politics of district councils, which inhibits a common vision and sours community relations more generally, despite the efforts of council CROS. Little in the councils' behaviour towards community-relations work demonstrated any risk-taking, and while CROS

attempt to support innovative practice, at times they lack the motivation to suggest changes that council members will ultimately reject.

Reconciliation issues have become political footballs within the council chamber, with issues of equality or distribution of funding being pursued in antagonistic fashion. This makes the work of CROS and voluntary practitioners problematic.

CROS have developed labyrinthine ways around these problems. These include approaching councillors individually to brief them on projects before they come to the council chamber and presenting grant proposals from both 'sides' at the same time, creating an artificial balance so councillors feel 'their community' is being acknowledged.

As noted earlier, our research underlines the view that community relations is not taken seriously by council officials or elected representatives. Legislative responsibilities should be strengthened to ensure that section 75(2) good-relations duties are viewed merely as a foundation for innovative reconciliation practice and a culture of risk-taking.

Most of those we spoke to supported further responsibility for reconciliation being devolved to district councils only if there were unequivocal regional support, adequate resources and significant change in the *modus operandi* of councils and councillors.

**W**hile this report has raised various criticisms of the way locally-elected politicians have grasped the reconciliation agenda in Northern Ireland, there is however some cause for optimism in

conclusion.

District councils are increasingly acknowledging their roles in demonstrating, supporting and developing reconciliatory behaviour in local settings. In the three case studies, many council members and all three chief executives articulated a desire to move beyond their statutory duties under section 75 and implement a creative approach to political dialogue and reconciliation.

With the publication of *A Shared Future* as an official policy framework, moreover, a real opportunity now exists for innovation within localities. The District Council Community Relations Programme is to be phased out and from April 2007 councils are required to develop three-year 'good relations' plans, which will be submitted to an enhanced Community Relations Council. Resources will follow the plans, but funding can be withheld if these are unsatisfactory and, subsequently, if adequate progress is not made.

The day after the document appeared, the review of public administration initiated by the devolved government published for consultations proposals which would see local authorities in Northern Ireland reduced from 26 to between seven and 15, with correspondingly enhanced powers.<sup>1</sup> This raises two critical challenges for the new local authorities, which are to come on stream with elections in 2009.

First, in terms of their internal culture, will they be willing and able to adopt models of genuine—rather than purely mechanistic—power-sharing, which begin to transform the politics of communal antagonism? And, second, in terms of their external representation,

will they be willing and able to identify, in the spirit of civic leadership, common or mutually agreed symbols, displaying municipal pride and a shared vision rather than ethnic dominance?

Unless these nettles are grasped, 'good relations' will indeed be the soft-option alternative to real reconciliation. And this is where the role of central government comes in.

In its final response to the review of public administration, the Northern Ireland Office must make one thing transparently clear. Ministers should affirm that while there are new powers on offer for the new local authorities, these powers will only be transferred if they are to be equally shared and if this sharing of power is reflected in common or mutually agreed symbolism distinctive to the locality.

Local authorities willing to rise to these challenges can make a step change in fostering reconciliation in their localities, in partnership with groups and individuals working on the ground—rather than in tension with them. It is an opportunity they should seize. ❧

<sup>1</sup> available at [www.rpani.gov.uk/consultdocu.pdf](http://www.rpani.gov.uk/consultdocu.pdf)



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# Contributors

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**Gráinne Kelly** was until recently research officer at Democratic Dialogue and remains a research associate of the organisation. She has worked on community relations and reconciliation for a number of years, her research projects including mediation of parades disputes, evaluation of conflict resolution training, the needs of victims of conflict and the role of local civic fora in dispute resolution. She holds an MA in peace and conflict studies from the University of Ulster and recently undertook a research fellowship at the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, City University, New York.

# Appendix A: case-study areas

## **Armagh City and District Council**

Armagh City and District Council is located south of Belfast and east of the River Bann, covering an area of around 260 square miles. The council area has a population of approximately 54,000, of which (according to the 2001 census) 45.6 per cent are Catholic, 17.4 per cent Presbyterian, 19.5 per cent Church of Ireland, 2.4 per cent Methodist, 6.5 per cent 'other denomination' and 9 per cent 'none' or 'not stated'. Combining the Protestant denominations gives an overall figure of around 45.8 per cent.

Armagh District Council was established in 1973 with the reorganisation of local government. In 1995, Armagh was officially granted city status. Given the current make-up of the council, it has been described as 'hung', with 11 of the 22 seats spread between the two main unionist parties and 11 shared between the SDLP and Sinn Féin. While the Alliance Party and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition have previously contested elections, they have failed to make any significant inroads in the area.

There have been substantial violence and communal tension in this district, including targeted killings (one of which resulted in the death of a unionist councillor in the early 80s). According to 1999 figures, Armagh District Council area has had the second highest number of conflict-related deaths after Belfast, with a rate of 2.5 per 1,000 (Fay, Morrissey and Smyth, 1999).

## **Omagh District Council**

Omagh District Council area is located west of the River Bann and is the second largest (after Fermanagh), covering 440 square miles. It is entirely located within Co Tyrone, encompassing mid- and west Tyrone, with Omagh town in the centre of the district. After Derry, Omagh is the second largest urban centre west of the Bann, with around half of the district's population living in the town, which acts as an important service and employment centre.

The area has a population of approximately 48,000, 65 per cent of whom are Catholic, 10.7 per cent Presbyterian, 11 per cent Church of Ireland, 1.4 per cent Methodist, 3.12 per cent 'other

denomination' and 8.3 per cent 'none' or 'not stated'. The combined Protestant population figure would be 26.2 per cent.

Since 1998, Omagh has become synonymous with the town-centre bomb which killed 29 people and injured hundreds in August that year. The death toll represented the single worst incident within Northern Ireland since the beginning of the present conflict. Between 1969 and 1999, 41 conflict-related deaths (including the Omagh bomb) were recorded. As a result, Omagh ranked 17th highest (out of 26) by district-council area for conflict-related deaths (Fay et al, 1999). Currently, SF is the largest party in the council, with eight seats, while the SDLP is second largest with six. The UUP holds three, while the DUP has two. There are also two independent councillors.

### **Ballymena Borough Council**

Ballymena Borough Council spans some 200 square miles. The council area is land-locked and in the north-east of Northern Ireland. Ballymena town is the administrative centre for many of the key statutory organisations and almost half the population of the borough lives there.

The district-council area has a population of 58,600, of whom around 19 per cent are Catholic, 45 per cent Presbyterian, 12 per cent Church of Ireland, 2.5 per cent Methodist, 9 per cent 'other denomination' and 13 per cent 'none' or 'not stated'. The combined Protestant population figure is around 68 per cent.

The largest party in the council is the DUP, which holds 11 of the 24 seats. The second largest is the UUP with seven seats, while the SDLP has four and there are two independents. During the course of the conflict, the death rate in the area was 0.18 per 1000, the fourth lowest figure by district council.

# Appendix B: interview schedule

## Interview Schedule Community Reconciliation Project

**Case Study Area:**

**Name of Interviewee:**

**Position:**

**Date of Interview:**

**Venue:**

**Interviewer name:**

**Interviewer address:** *(If interviewee wishes to be kept informed of the research findings)*

**Email:**

### Issues to be covered in introduction to interview

The purpose of the research (*see following page for project explanation*)

The purpose of the interviews

Interviews will be recorded for data collection purposes only. All tapes will remain with Democratic Dialogue and will only be accessible to project staff. *(If they would like tapes returned / destroyed after the project is complete, they are free to request so.)*

The interview is confidential

Quotes will not be attributed by name in reports

Are you happy to have your name included at the back of a report under the general list of interviewees?

**Remember:** Ask interviewee if they wish for any clarification on the research aims or if they have any further questions. It is important that respondents understand the research focus.



### **About the Project (*for more information, see short background document*)**

Democratic Dialogue has been awarded a Peace II, Measure 2.1 research grant by the Community Relations Council to explore the question: *‘What is the place for reconciliation in community relations work?’* The project is 18 months in duration and the research reports should be published in May–June of next year.

#### **The research project aims to explore:**

- how the term ‘reconciliation’ is conceptualised within a range of community organisations and local authorities and
- how this understanding is translated into practical strategies for action in engaging various sectors of society.

#### **This will be done with a view towards:**

- understanding the opportunities and challenges created by local council structures, and
- to practically assist in the increasing development of mutual understanding and effective partnerships between local authorities and the community and voluntary sector,
- thus ensuring more sustainable reconciliation practice into the future.

#### **Choosing of case studies**

Three council areas have been chosen as the focus of the study, but it is hoped that the lessons learned from these case studies will be of benefit to all 26 district council areas.

These case studies have been chosen, after much consideration, with the assistance of an independent steering committee consisting of both local and international academics and practitioners in the field of community relations. In order to ensure a diversity within the case studies chosen a number of criteria were used, including

- the religious and political make-up within the council area,
- its geographical location and remit (to include both urban and rural areas),
- the level of community and voluntary sector activity and
- the commitment to community relations within district council structures.

#### **The purpose of the interviews:**

To explore the concepts and practices of reconciliation with people who deal with these issues on a daily basis. We hope this process will be useful for all parties and will be an opportunity for us to work together to find the answers to some of these challenging questions.

#### **Project outputs**

- An audit of local reconciliation projects for each of the three case study areas;
- Three case study area reports providing an overview of reconciliation strategies used by the community groups under study and outlining the role and function of local councils in supporting

or constraining this work (including recommendations of ways in which this support could be further enhanced);

- A composite and analytical final report integrating the lessons from the case study areas, including an overview of key themes and comparative lessons, a theoretical assessment of the meaning and nature of reconciliation in local communities, and providing an overview of reconciliation strategies used by the community groups under study;
- A roundtable discussion event with interested parties and research participants at the end of the research and
- A report emanating from the round table discussion.

## CONTEXT

**Rationale:** These questions should provide the interviewee with the opportunity to explain their work in general terms and will ease the interviewee in, before moving on to some more theoretical questions. The questions should be tailored to reflect the work of the individual (eg. Councillor or voluntary sector staff member, etc.)

1. Can you describe your work to us? *When did they start this work? How long have they been doing it? What are the main activities and programmes they have been involved in? What is their role within council? What committees do they sit on?*

2. What do you understand your work as seeking to achieve?

3. Given a choice, what would you call this work? *How do you categorise this work? Prompt: community relations work / single identity work / peacebuilding / reconciliation / political organisation?*

4. What do you understand to be the differences / similarities between these terms? *We are aiming to examine if/why people differential between terms such as CR and reconciliation, and to what extent this is intentional or 'habit'*

## VISION AND CONCEPTS

**Rationale:** These questions are designed to explore what the interviewee understands by the term 'reconciliation' and how it relates to their own context and work. It is also an opportunity to present the interviewee with our 'definition' of reconciliation and explore how much they can relate to the term.

**Hypothesis:** *If people (councils / voluntary sector) had a clearer conceptual understanding of what is meant by 'reconciliation' they would be able to develop better practical projects to address the issue. The nature of people's vision of reconciliation may determine how well they interact with others. Those with a clear vision may be more disposed to interacting with others in a meaningful way.*

**NB:** We must make it clear that we are investigating the term 'reconciliation' and there is no expectation that this is the work people should be doing – we are just interested in exploring the concept further.

5. What do you understand by the term 'reconciliation'? *Explore what people mean by the term reconciliation and how comfortable they are using the term to describe aspects / all of their work. What is reconciliation not? Try to explore if the person locates reconciliation within a continuum which may involve earlier steps, such as single-identity work; encounter work etc*

6. What might a reconciled society look like? *This is a 'vision' question and aims to get them to think in practical terms of what the final aim might be in reconciliation work*  
**Prompt:** *Does this society go beyond a culture of 'politeness' or 'friendliness'?*

7. What does reconciliation mean in your work context? *This may have been previously covered, but might still be worth revisiting.*

8. Is there a place for a concept such as reconciliation in NI?

### RECONCILIATION HANDOUT

Our working hypothesis is that reconciliation is a necessary process following conflict.

However, we believe it is a voluntary act and cannot be imposed.

It involves five interwoven and related strands:

- Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society
- Acknowledging and dealing with the past
- Building positive relationships
- Significant cultural and attitudinal change
- Substantial social, economic and political change

## INTRODUCE DEFINITION

Explain that we have put together this definition of reconciliation, based on a composite of other definitions and explanations which have been used previously. Ask the interviewee to look first at the five general ‘parts’ of reconciliation as we have envisaged them and explain a little about what each one means for us.

**NB: We are looking for people’s views on this definition and not saying that this is the definitive version in any way. It is a working definition.**

9. What do you think about this definition?

10. Do you think these are the main components of reconciliation? *Do you think that some happen before / after each other? What order might interviewee put them in? Why? Is there a continuum or do they have to happen simultaneously?*

11. Do you think these are equally weighted or equally important, or is some more important than others?

Try to unpack each section individually with the interviewee to gain a sense of their priorities in terms of reconciliation and how they view the process.

## APPLYING WORK AND EXPERIENCE TO THEORY AND CONCEPTS

**Rationale:** The purpose of these questions to for the interviewee to begin to relate their work to the discussion on reconciliation.

**Hypothesis:** *A clear articulation of how the individuals work is related to reconciliation will result in a clearer understanding of the initiatives which may assist reconciliation in Northern Ireland.*

12. Can you relate this definition to your work experience? *Can you recognise your work in the strands of this definition? If this is to councillors, you are looking at their work as local reps and how much of this is related to community relations or reconciliation.*

13. Do you think there is a place for the concept of reconciliation as we have discussed it in your work? *Consider, if necessary the differences between political level reconciliation and community reconciliation? What is useful about working at local level? What is challenging about working at local level? What events at local level have challenged the work of community relations in the*

town? (e.g. Omagh bomb etc) How much have the council done to accommodate differing views within? (e.g. alternating mayors between parties)

14. Do you know of any positive / unhelpful examples of reconciliation initiatives which have been undertaken within the district?

## **POLICIES, PRACTICES AND STRUCTURES**

**Rationale:** To build reconciliation at the community and council level we think that different dimensions, which cut across the various aspects of the definition, need to be considered. They are:

- The policies and procedures that can build reconciliation
- The roles and responsibilities of individuals / organisations in such processes
- The relationships between the main actors involved

**Hypothesis:** *If people had a clearer understanding of the impact of certain policies and practices on community relations and reconciliation work, they would be in a better position to develop reconciliation work in a more effective way.*

15. What is your view of the council's community relations policy at present? *This question is aiming to explore the perceptions which exist within / outside of council towards their work on CR issues. How do you view the progression of reconciliation work over the past number of years within the council (within the c&v sector)? Are you aware of particular policies within council related to specific areas, such as **victims, ex-prisoners, memorials and commemorations**? Do you think that the concept of reconciliation should / could be part of an overall CR policy? How has the CR policy developed over the years? Have things improved?*

16. Do you think the CR policy is implemented in practice? *We are not looking to evaluate their CR strategy – but to see how the intentions / rhetoric of council translate into action? Who is involved? Is it more than financial support? Are there key people who push a reconciliation agenda in the council? If not, why not?*

17. How easy or difficult have you found it to implement reconciliation initiatives at local level? *What **structures, policies or practices** have hindered / promoted reconciliation? This question seeks to explore how much the actual set-up of councils (council chambers / committees / processes and procedures) limit the possibilities of improving relations across sectarian divisions etc. What about the local media? Do you think there is opposition to the practice of reconciliation within the council?*

18. What is it that you need from council / community groups to enhance reconciliation? *Should the role of the CRO be made more prominent? Should council committees work differently? etc.*

## RELATIONSHIPS

**Hypothesis:** *If people had a clearer understanding of their relationships within their own organisations / councils and between sectors, they would be in a better position to undertake reconciliation work in a more conducive atmosphere.*

19. How would you describe the relationship between x and y?

- community & voluntary sector
- local council
- local strategy partnership
- Community Relations Unit
- other bodies?

*This question should explore and describe the various relationships between and within the different groups – community & voluntary, council, LSP, other relevant bodies. Use appropriate permutations. Are the relationships symbiotic / necessary / practical / useful / obligatory? How to the different sectors relate to each other? What is different about working at local level?*

20. How are you as CRO / community group / councillor thought of by community sector / councillors / LSP etc?

21. To what degree do you think relationships are important in building reconciliation?

22. What factors assist / promote / hinder the development / maintenance / growth of these relationships? *Is it good lines of communication? Involvement in relevant networks? Personality based? Geographically based? – close proximity?*

22. Are there times when relations (between / within) (council / c&v sector) are particularly challenged? *Around election time? During summer months – bonfires, flags, parades, etc.*

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

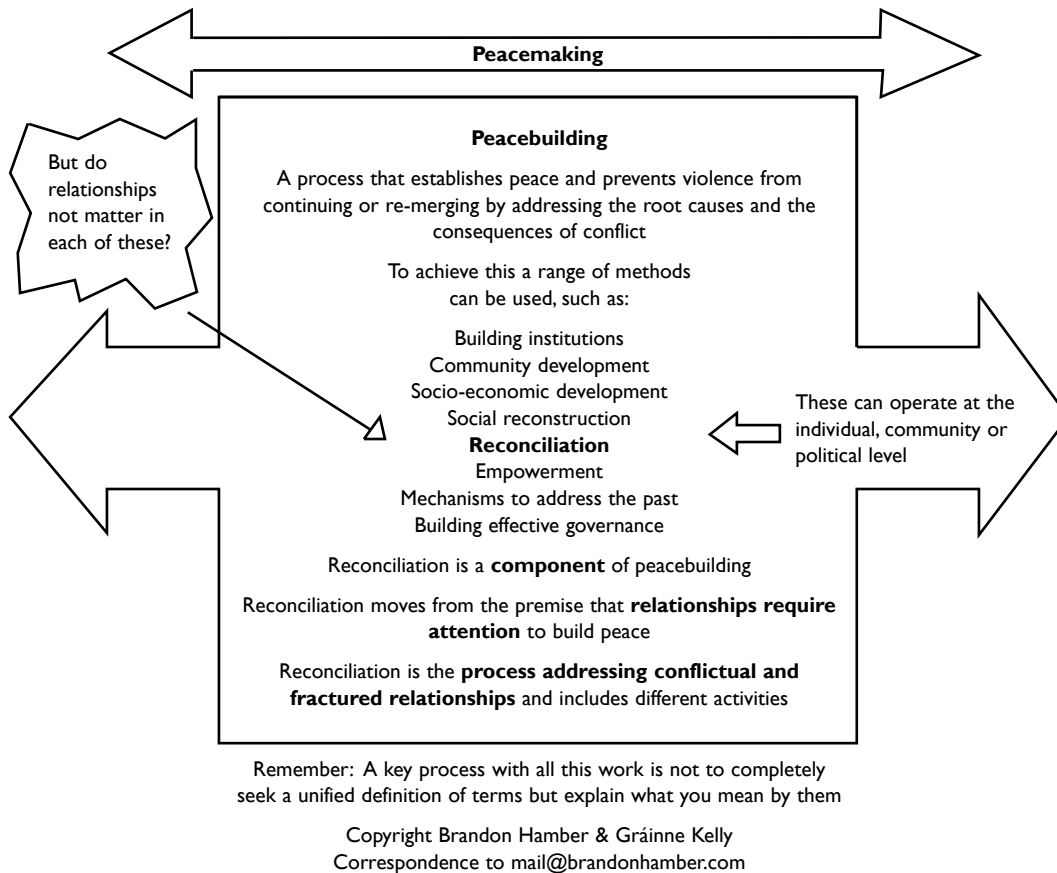
**Hypothesis:** *If people had a clearer understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different players, they would be in a better position to design and undertake reconciliation work in a more effective way.*

25. Whose *responsibility* is it to undertake reconciliation work? (nationally, regionally, locally?)  
*Do you think that the balance of roles and responsibilities between sectors is fair? Should this balance be changed? How would you go about this?*

26. What responsibilities do community groups / local councils have for promoting reconciliation at local level?

27. Do you think that local councils should be given more or less responsibility for delivering on community relations (reconciliation) initiatives? *This is an aspect of the Shared Future consultation document which poses the question of whether further powers / funds should be devolved to local district council level*

# Appx C: peacebuilding, reconciliation





# Appendix D: associated phrases

All of these words and phrases were used at least once by the interviewees in defining reconciliation:

- |                               |                                     |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Accepting what has happened | • Ensure it does not happen again   |
| • Accepting diversity         | • Explanations                      |
| • Acknowledging suffering     | • Forgiveness                       |
| • At ease with each other     | • Partnerships                      |
| • At one with others          | • Integration                       |
| • Being comfortable           | • Less institutional separation     |
| • Better understanding        | • Meeting                           |
| • Beyond toleration           | • Mercy                             |
| • Bland                       | • Painful                           |
| • Bridge-building             | • Personal                          |
| • Building relationships      | • Putting division behind them      |
| • Changed                     | • Recognising a wrong               |
| • Come together               | • Recognising each other            |
| • Commitment                  | • Recognising the past              |
| • Common interests            | • Remorse                           |
| • Confidence                  | • Risk                              |
| • Consensus                   | • Step across boundaries            |
| • Crossing the divide         | • The space between peace and truth |
| • Differences                 | • Theological                       |
| • Dignity                     | • Working together                  |
| • Enemies become friends      | • Wrong done in the past            |